



## Out of bounds: factors affecting the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs



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### ABSTRACT

Racial slurs are terms used primarily to disparage individuals belonging to the targeted social group. In two studies, we manipulated racial slurs (“nigger”, “nigga”) used by White individuals toward Black individuals in different situations (between friends versus between strangers) to assess different levels of perceived offensiveness in White third party observers. Consistent with our hypotheses, in Study 1 we found that the use of racial slurs between friends was perceived to be less offensive than between strangers, and “nigga” was perceived to be less offensive than “nigger”. In Study 2 we replicated these results, and extended them by finding that ratings of offensiveness, consistent with hypotheses, were correlated with individual differences relating to the justification and suppression of prejudice. Our findings suggest that observers’ reactions to racial slurs depend on the context in which the slur is used and perceivers’ beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice.

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Slurs are terms that have primarily been used with the intention of disparaging individuals of a certain social group (e.g., sex, race, nationality). By using a slur to target a member of an outgroup, individuals are often asserting an overall negative attitude toward the entire target group (Camp, 2013). Slurs are not always used in a derogatory manner, however. Additional research on slurs has found support for the positive use of derogatory slurs among members of the group targeted by the slur. Members of stigmatized groups use appropriated slurs to enhance bonding and express affiliation amongst ingroup members (Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Rahman, 2012; Galinsky et al., 2013). Research thus indicates that, in some situations, slurs are perceived to be less offensive and more socially acceptable.

In the current studies, we examined how the use of various racial slurs in different situations (between friends versus between strangers) affects perceptions of the offensiveness of the racial slur usage by third party observers of the slur, and whether beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice are related to how offensive individuals view racial slur usage. Previous research has shown that the presence of a racial slur affects third party witnesses’ judgments of the wrongness of racial crimes such that individuals will recommend a higher prison sentence to the perpetrator of a violent crime and judge the crime to be more severe (i.e., a hate crime) when the perpetrator uses a racial slur (Saucier et al., 2008, 2010).

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In the current studies, we extend previous research by examining the perceived offensiveness of various racial slurs between friends versus strangers and how this perceived offensiveness may be correlated with individual differences related to expressions of prejudice. Previous research has not fully examined how third party observers' perceptions of racial slurs may depend on the context in which the slur was used. Furthermore, there is little existing empirical evidence that examines if variability in perceptions of racial slurs can be explained by individual differences related to prejudice. Extending contemporary theories of prejudice, including the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003), our overarching research question is: does the extent to which racial slurs are perceived as offensive vary as a function of perceivers' beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice?

## 1. Racial slurs

### 1.1. What is a slur?

Slurs are terms used primarily to disparage individuals of a targeted racial, gender, or other social group (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Slurs often imply negative stereotypes or beliefs about the target group or individual beyond simply identifying group membership. Calling an individual a "nigger" implies more than simply calling that person "Black" (Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013; Vallée, 2014). At the semantic level, "nigger" and "Black" appear to function as descriptors, both referring to a person's skin color. However, the term "nigger" implies more than a general description of the target. Use of the term "nigger", as a slur, often or in paradigmatic cases implies that the person targeted by the slur is despicable simply as a result of being part of that social group (Jeshion, 2013; Vallée, 2014) and, thus, may result in negative reactions (e.g., confrontation, social sanctions) by the target or third party observers.

Much research has been done on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), examining what is presented and implied by slur usage. There is much debate in current literature over whether slurs are purely descriptive or purely expressive in nature, with descriptivist arguments trending toward semantic properties (i.e., the true meaning of the words being used), and expressivist arguments focusing on the pragmatics (i.e., the implied meaning of the words being used; Hedger, 2012, 2013). Arguing for a compromise between the two extremes, Croom (2011, 2014) asserts that most slurs carry severe negative connotations, thus preventing them from acting as socially appropriate descriptors, although he acknowledges that slurs do not seem to function as pure expressives either, concluding that racial slurs may function as both expressives and descriptors. For the purposes of the current studies, we proceed with Croom's (2011, 2014) compromise acknowledging that slurs may be used to describe an individual, but may also carry negative connotations beyond simple description, thus functioning as both a combination or mixture of expressives and descriptors.

### 1.2. Effects of slurs

Despite decreases in expressions of overt prejudice in contemporary society, racism (McConahay et al., 1981; Sydel and Nelson, 2000) and the use of racial slurs (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Merskin, 2010) continues to affect individuals of various social groups. Slurs can have negative effects on individuals (Mullen, 2001), which may include lowering their sense of belonging or self-worth (Schneider et al., 2000). While racial slurs can have direct negative effects on the target, research has shown that racial slurs may also have indirect effects on individuals belonging to different social groups. Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that when racial slurs are used between individuals in professional settings and are overheard by third party observers, and that when these third party observers witness the target of the racial slur exhibit poor performance, observers tend to have significantly lower opinions of the individual targeted by the racial slur. They attribute the failure of the individual more to the outgroup member's disposition rather than to the situation. Stated differently, they tend to believe that the target of the racial slur possesses lower abilities rather than attributing the lower performance to stress that result from being disparaged by the racial slur (i.e., stereotype threat). Thus, the effects of racial slurs are not always obvious and explicit. These effects may have negative consequences (e.g., lower chance of career advancement) in the workplace if an outgroup member is viewed more negatively for doing poorly on a task than an ingroup member who has not been targeted by a racial slur. Although the majority of slur usage implies negativity, not all slurs have the same effect. Levels of reported offensiveness by the target of the racial slur vary depending on the racial slur being used (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Schneider et al., 2000).

Slurs are not equal in offensive intensity (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Henry et al., 2014; Jeshion, 2013). Anderson and Lepore (2013) discuss differing perceptions of offensiveness between racial slurs (e.g., "nigger" versus "cracker"), suggesting that the negative connotations surrounding the use of various racial slurs largely changes depending on the word being used. For example, "nigger" is thought by many to be the worst racial slur (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011; Jeshion, 2013) and has even been referred to as the "filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23). The term "nigger" results in extremely negative reactions such that many would feel ashamed for even hearing it (Croom, 2011). Other slurs are obviously derogatory, although they do not carry the same extreme negative reactions by targets or third party perceivers of the slur. Thus, consistent with Croom (2013a; 2014), we hypothesize that the perceived offensiveness of a racial slur by a third party observer will vary as a function of the racial slur that is used, such that the term "nigger" will be perceived as more offensive than the term "nigga", or other, non-racial insults.

Slurs may be used in many different social settings (e.g., between friends versus between strangers). Because of the abundance of situations in which slurs may occur, there is difficulty in accounting for situational factors that directly affect

perceptions of the offensiveness of a racial slur. However, researchers tend to agree that racial slur usage is perceived to be more offensive when the intent of the perpetrator (i.e., the person using the slur) is to harm or derogate the target (Cushman, 2008; Pizarro et al., 2003; Woolfolk et al., 2006). However, the intention to do harm is not a necessary component of causing harm. Research on the semantics of racial slurs has shown that even when harm is not the intention of the perpetrator, the negative connotations attached to slurs can incur negative consequences (i.e., stereotype threat) on the target of the racial slur (Gabriel, 1998). Thus, while it may be that racial slurs are paradigmatically harmful, some individuals may evaluate the offensiveness of a racial slur as a function of the intention to do harm. Whether or not perceivers of slur usage interpret the perpetrator's intention as harmful may depend on the relationship between the perpetrator and target (e.g., friends versus strangers; Hom, 2008) in addition to the slur being used. Friends may be perceived to be less likely to intend to do harm to each other than strangers. Thus, we predict that the use of racial slurs between individuals who appear to be friends will be perceived as less offensive than when racial slurs are used between strangers.

### 1.3. *The justification and suppression of expressions of prejudice*

In addition to the content of the slur and the situation in which it is used, judgments of offensiveness are also likely to be influenced by individual differences between observers. Beginning with the situation, the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003) establishes that situations contain justification and suppression factors which increase or decrease the perceived appropriateness of expressions of prejudice, which in turn affects the likelihood that prejudice will be expressed (e.g., Saucier et al., 2005). Furthermore, the model asserts that the likelihood of an individual expressing prejudice is largely affected by that individual's perception of the appropriateness of the expression of prejudice, which is largely due to an individuals' desire to appear non-prejudiced to others (Plant and Devine, 1998), and that the degree of appropriateness can be predicted by situational factors as well as individual differences (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003; King and Ahmad, 2010; King et al., 2006). Individuals differ in their level of genuine prejudice, and as a result also differ in their level of motivation to justify or suppress the expression of prejudice. Furthermore, individuals are likely to differ in terms of the extent to which they are affected by justification or suppression factors, and as such, likely to differ in their general beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing racial prejudice. Because racial slurs may be perceived as expressions of prejudice, we hypothesize that the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs is related to individual differences in observers' levels of racial prejudice as well as their beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing racial prejudice, such that less prejudiced individuals and individuals who more strongly believe that expressions of racial prejudice are inappropriate will judge the use of racial slurs to be more offensive.

## 2. Overview of current studies

In the current studies we examined how White third party observers' reactions to various slurs used by a racial ingroup member (i.e., another White individual) to target a Black individual vary as a function of the relationship between the perpetrator and target of the slur as well as the racial slur being used. Additionally, we examined whether the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs is related to White perceivers' own prejudices and their beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice. Previous research on appropriated slurs has shown that slurs may be perceived to be lower in offensiveness when used among individuals of the same group (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2013). We sought to extend this research by assessing whether, and under what circumstances, Whites may perceive slurs used by other White individuals toward Black individuals to be less offensive. Therefore, in Study 1, we examined White participants' reactions to witnessing two different variations of a racial slur ("nigger", "nigga") used by a White individual to target a Black friend or a Black stranger to examine how the different versions of the slur, as well as context may affect perceptions of offensiveness in third party observers of the slur. Building on recent slur research by Croom (2013a; 2014), we hypothesized that slurs will be judged to be more offensive when directed at a stranger than when directed at a friend and that the "nigger" slur would be judged to be more offensive than the "nigga" slur. In Study 2, we intended to replicate our findings and extend them by including "buddy" and "asshole" as non-racial insults. Additionally we examined how perceived offensiveness to these different slurs varies as a function of White observers' level of prejudice and their beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice.

## 3. Study 1

We designed our first study to examine White third party observers' perceptions of the offensiveness of different racial slurs used between friends versus between strangers. The design of our first study was a 2 (relationship: friend, stranger) × 2 (slur: "nigger", "nigga") between groups design in which we presented participants with a vignette in which we manipulated both the racial slur being used between two individuals as well as their relationship, which was explicitly stated in the vignette.

### 3.1. *Method*

**Participants.** Eighty-four Caucasian participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were compensated \$10 for their participation. All participants (50 males, 33 females, 1 participant did not respond to the gender

question) completed the measures from a location within one of 32 states within the United States and 92.9% reported having an American national identity. The average age of the participants was 35.01 ( $SD = 11.02$ ).

**Vignettes.** The vignette described a White individual (depicted by an image of a White individual) Alex making the winning shot in a basketball game and then turning to Sam (depicted by an image of a Black individual) and saying, “Swish nigger (or nigga).” The beginning of each vignette was varied to manipulate the relationship between Alex and Sam. In conditions where Alex and Sam were strangers, the beginning read, “Sam and Alex are on different intramural basketball teams. They have never met before.” In conditions where Alex and Sam were friends the beginning read, “Sam and Alex are friends on the same intramural basketball team.” The full vignette is as follows (as it was presented in the Friends/“Nigger” condition):

Sam and Alex are friends on the same intramural basketball team. Today they played a game against another intramural team. The game was tied 20–20 with two minutes left in the game. Both teams had been playing well throughout the game but as it progressed both teams had gotten more competitive. As the clock counted down the final seconds Alex dribbled the ball toward the hoop. Sam was running close to Alex. Alex stopped just outside of the three-point line and shot. The ball went in, scoring Alex and Sam’s team three points. Alex then turned to Sam and said, “Swish, nigger.”

**Measures.** Participants completed the materials online. Participants first answered demographic questions about their age, ethnicity, and sex. Free-response items were used to measure the participants’ age and ethnicity. After the participants had read one of the four vignettes, which were randomly assigned, they were asked to complete the measure of offensiveness described below.

**Perceived offensiveness of a racial slur.** In order to measure how participants reacted to the slur usage we designed a scale to measure levels of perceived offensiveness of hearing the racial slur. Ten items were created specifically to examine participants’ beliefs about the normality and appropriateness of using a racial slur in the context of our vignette and included items such as, *This type of language is normal* (reverse scored) and *I do not agree with using this language in any situation* (see Appendix A for a complete list of items). All items were measured on a 1 (disagree very strongly)–9 (agree very strongly) scale and antithetical items were reverse coded before averaging scores to create a composite score such that higher scores represented higher levels of perceived offensiveness. Our measure was found to have a high level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### 4. Study 1 results and discussion

The composite variable representing perceived offensiveness to the use of the slur in the vignette was entered as the dependent measure in a 2 (slur: “nigger”, “nigga”)  $\times$  2 (relationship: friend, stranger) between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA). Consistent with our hypothesis that the use of “nigger” would be judged to be more offensive than “nigga”, there was a main effect for slur,  $F(1, 80) = 13.79, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .15$ , such that the perceived offensiveness of “nigger” ( $M = 6.78, SD = 1.39$ ) was higher than the perceived offensiveness of “nigga” ( $M = 5.44, SD = 2.04$ ). Consistent with our hypothesis that slur use would be judged to be more offensive when the target was a stranger than when the target was a friend, there was a main effect for relationship,  $F(1, 80) = 9.43, p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .11$ , such that perceived offensiveness was higher when the target was a stranger ( $M = 6.64, SD = 1.61$ ) than when the target was a friend ( $M = 5.50, SD = 1.96$ ). The slur  $\times$  relationship interaction was non-significant,  $F(1, 80) = 1.41, p = .238$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Fig. 1 displays a plot of these effects.

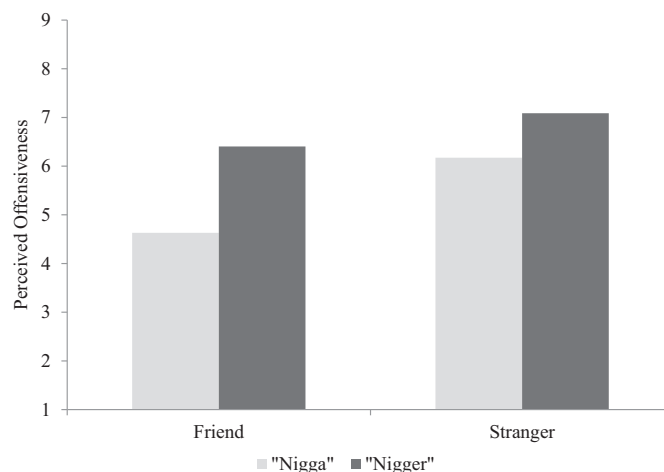


Fig. 1. Perceived offensiveness of racial slur use (Study 1).

Study 1 was designed to test whether or not observers' perceived offensiveness to syntactic variations in slur usage depends on the social context in which they are used. In summary, participants judged the use of the "nigger" slur to be more offensive than the "nigga", and more offensive when the target of the slur was a stranger compared to when the target of the slur was a friend. These findings suggest that the social context and linguistic variations of the slur affect how observers react to slur usage. More specifically, the results of Study 1 suggest that third party White observers' reactions to an interracial interaction in which a racial slur is used by a White individual toward a Black individual are affected by the type of slur and the actor's relationship with the target (e.g., referring to a friend as "nigga").

## 5. Study 2

We designed Study 2 to replicate and extend the results of Study 1. In Study 1, we showed that relationship of the perpetrator and the target, as well as the racial slur used, significantly affected the perceived offensiveness of the slur. In Study 2, we presented White participants with similar vignettes and added non-racial terms "buddy" and "asshole" to the slur manipulation. These two terms were used as control insults by not being linked to a type of group membership. Both are general insults which represent a range of offensiveness. We predicted that asshole will be perceived to be more offensive than buddy; however, we anticipated that, at least in the stranger condition, the term "buddy" may be perceived to be offensive due to individuals viewing its use as demeaning. The design of the resulting experiment was a 2 (relationship: friend, stranger)  $\times$  4 (slur: "nigger", "nigga", "asshole", "buddy") between groups design in which we presented participants with the same vignette used in Study 1. We first sought to replicate the results of Study 1 by assessing participants' perceived offensiveness to the racial slur being used. Next we sought to replicate and extend previous research by Simon and Greenberg (1996) who found that personal attitudes about Blacks affect how individuals view both the perpetrator and victim when a White individual uses a slur to target a Black individual. We extended these findings by examining how measures of perceived offensiveness of racial slurs were correlated with individuals' levels of prejudice as well as their beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice. The "buddy" and "asshole" conditions were included to test whether Whites' beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice specifically predicted perceptions of offensiveness more strongly when racial slurs are used versus when insults are used generally.

### 5.1. Method

**Participants.** One hundred forty-two Caucasian participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were compensated \$.25 for their participation. All participants (83 males, 59 females) completed the measures from a location within one of 35 states within the United States and 91.5% reported having an American national identity. The average age of the participants was 33.53 ( $SD = 11.70$ ).

**Measures.** Participants again completed the materials by completing an online survey. They first answered demographic questions about their age, ethnicity, and sex. We again used free-response items to measure the participants' age and ethnicity. After the participants read one of eight randomly assigned vignettes, they were asked to complete the measures described below. Unless otherwise stated, all items were measured on a 1 (disagree very strongly)–9 (agree very strongly) scale and antithetical items were reverse coded before averaging to create a composite score such that higher scores represented higher levels of the construct being measured. Following administration of the perceived offensiveness of a racial slur measure, all other scales were presented in random order to control for order effects. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and reliabilities for each measure.

**Perceived offensiveness of a racial slur.** In order to measure how participants reacted to the slur usage we used the same perceived offensiveness of a racial slur scale that we created for Study 1.

**Appropriateness of expressions of prejudice.** To measure participant's beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice, we created a 6-item justification and suppression measure. Three items were written to measure beliefs about whether expressions of prejudice toward Blacks are justified: *negative stereotypes about Blacks are justified*, *prejudice toward Blacks is justified*, and *discrimination against Blacks is justified*. Three items were written to measure beliefs about whether expressions of prejudice should be suppressed: *negative stereotypes about Blacks should not be expressed*, *discrimination against Blacks should not be expressed*, and *prejudice toward Blacks should not be expressed*.

**Table 1**

Descriptive statistics for perceived offensiveness and predictors.

		M (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1.	Perceived offensiveness	4.32 (2.28)	(.94)						
2.	Prejudice expressions justified	2.55 (1.97)	-.03	(.91)					
3.	Suppress prejudice expressions	6.75 (2.33)	.15	-.51**	(.89)				
4.	Cavalier racial humor	4.92 (2.32)	-.19*	.38**	-.48**	(.91)			
5.	NFL N-word ban	6.40 (2.70)	.22**	-.27**	.36**	-.59**	(.96)		
6.	Endorse negative stereotypes	3.95 (2.11)	-.12	.67**	-.33**	.34**	-.21**	(.94)	
7.	Warmth toward blacks	72.40 (23.21)	.13	-.62**	.34**	-.32**	.21**	-.68**	-

Note. Bivariate correlations and Cronbach's alphas (in parentheses on the diagonal) for each of the measures are shown on the right half of the table; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .



**Warmth thermometer towards Blacks.** To measure participants' levels of prejudice toward Blacks, we administered a feeling thermometer (Miller et al., 2004) that we modified to specifically examine feelings toward Blacks. Participants were given the following instructions: *Using an analogy of a thermometer, please write in a temperature rating from 0° to 100°: How warmly do you feel about Blacks in general?*

**Endorsement of negative Black stereotypes.** To measure participant's endorsement of negative stereotypes about Blacks we modified a scale by Cozzarelli et al. (2001). We included five negative traits (lazy, loud, low intelligence, aggressive, uneducated). Each of these items was measured on a 1 (*Not at all accurate*)–9 (*Extremely accurate*) scale. Scores were averaged to create a composite score of negative stereotypical beliefs, such that higher scores represented higher endorsement of negative stereotypes about Blacks.

**Cavalier racial humor beliefs.** To measure participant's endorsement of ethnic humor and the appropriateness of expressing prejudice through humor, we modified the cavalier humor beliefs scale by Hodson et al. (2010) to directly target racial humor beliefs. Items included: *Sometimes people need to relax and realize that a racial joke is just a joke, Society needs to lighten up about racial jokes and humor generally, People get too easily offended by racial jokes, It is okay to laugh at the differences between people, Racial jokes are simply fun, and People should not tell racial jokes that put others down.*

**NFL n-word ban.** To measure beliefs about expressions of prejudice in a more specific context, we created items to measure support for the potential National Football League rule which would ban the use of the word "nigger" on the field and would be punishable by a penalty. We asked participants to rate their agreement with four items assessing their endorsement of the rule. Items included: *Players should be penalized for using the word "nigger" during a game, Players should be penalized for using the word "nigger" in any context during a game, The NFL should ban the use of the word "nigger" in games, and The use of the word "nigger" in the context of an NFL game is not that big of a deal.*

## 6. Study 2 results and discussion

To test whether our findings from Study 1 would replicate, the composite variable representing perceived offensiveness to the use of the slur in the vignette was entered as the dependent measure in a 4 (slur: "nigger", "nigga", "asshole", "buddy") × 2 (relationship: friend, stranger) between groups ANOVA. Fig. 2 plots the mean offensiveness ratings for each condition in the design. Consistent with our hypothesis that ratings of offensiveness would increase from "buddy" to "asshole" to "nigga" to "nigger", there was a main effect for slur,  $F(3, 134) = 63.71, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .59$ . Post-hoc analyses showed that perceived offensiveness significantly differed between each of the slur conditions ( $ps < .001$ ), such that "nigger" ( $M = 6.40, SD = 1.52$ ) was rated higher in offensiveness than "nigga" ( $M = 5.48, SD = 1.96$ ), which in turn was rated higher than "asshole" ( $M = 3.93, SD = 1.45$ ), followed by the lowest ratings of offensiveness for "buddy" ( $M = 1.93, SD = 1.12$ ). Consistent with our hypothesis that slur use would be judged to be more offensive when the target was a stranger than when the target was a friend, there was a main effect for relationship,  $F(1, 134) = 7.52, p = .007$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ , such that perceived offensiveness was higher when the target was a stranger ( $M = 4.60, SD = 2.38$ ) than when the target was a friend ( $M = 3.99, SD = 2.14$ ). The slur × relationship interaction was non-significant,  $F(3, 134) = .86, p = .462$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ . The main effects replicated the pattern of effects from Study 1, suggesting that the type of slur and the relationship between the perpetrator and the target (e.g., friends or strangers) affect White third party observers' reactions to witnessing a racial slur being used by a White individual to target a Black individual.

Because we wanted to use individual differences to predict perceived offensiveness, the above analysis was repeated for each of our individual differences measures to assess whether our experimental manipulations of the slur and the relationship between the perpetrator and the target affected participants' reported levels of prejudice (warmth toward Blacks and

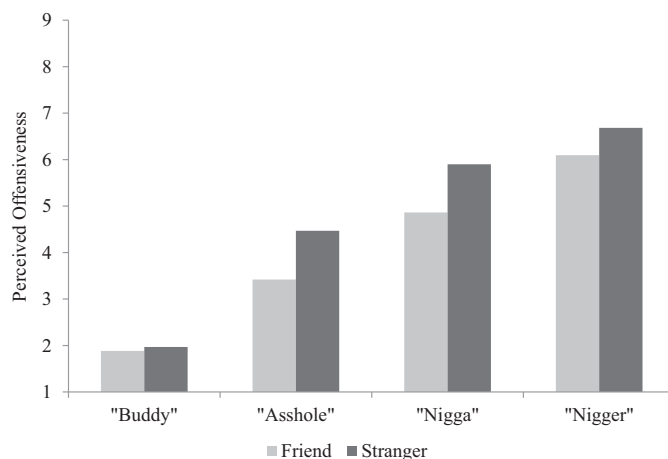


Fig. 2. Perceived offensiveness of racial slur use (Study 2).

endorsement of negative Black stereotypes) or their beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice (justification and suppression measures, cavalier racial humor, and support for the NFL n-word ban). None of the main effects or interactions was significant. Therefore, we conclude that participants' self-reported warmth toward Blacks, stereotype endorsement, and the additional measures relating to beliefs about expressions of prejudice were not affected by the type of slur, the relationship between the perpetrator and the target, or their interaction.

To test whether these individual differences in prejudice and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice predicted perceived offensiveness, we entered the composite slur offensiveness ratings as the criterion variable in a hierarchical multiple regression model. Because slur type did not interact with the relationship factor in our design, we simplified the model in terms of the number of product terms needed to test for interactions between the slur conditions and the individual differences predictors. Specifically, we collapsed the design across the relationship factor and only entered the dummy-coded slur conditions into the first step of the model. In the second step, the individual difference predictor was entered, and in the third step, the product terms carrying the interaction between the individual difference predictor and the slur conditions were entered into the model. We were primarily interested in the interactions between the type of slur used and the individual differences measuring White participants' prejudice toward Blacks (warmth toward blacks and endorsement of negative Black stereotypes Blacks) and their beliefs about expressions of racial prejudice toward Blacks (justification and suppression measures, cavalier racial humor, and support for the NFL n-word ban).

Table 2 displays the simple slopes for each of the individual difference predictors of slur offensiveness by each of the slur conditions. Each of the six models accounted for 60% or more of the variance in perceived offensiveness and the individual differences measure  $\times$  slur condition interactions were significant for the four models that included measures of beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of racial prejudice. The pattern of simple effects suggested that as the level of offensiveness increased from "buddy" to "asshole" to "nigga" to "nigger", the strength of the relationships between the measures of beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of racial prejudice and participants' perceived offensiveness of the slur also increased, such that, in general, higher levels of beliefs that racial prejudice should not be expressed were related to higher levels of perceived offensiveness and this effect was strongest in the "nigger" slur condition. Specifically, higher levels of beliefs that expressions of racial prejudice are justified were related to lower levels of perceived offensiveness only in the "nigger" slur condition. Higher levels of cavalier racial humor attitudes were related to lower levels of perceived offensiveness and this effect was stronger in the "nigger", "nigga", and "asshole" slur conditions (non-significant in the "buddy" condition). Similarly, higher levels of beliefs that expressions of racial prejudice should be suppressed and higher levels of support for the NFL n-word ban were related to higher levels of perceived offensiveness and these effects were stronger in the "nigger" and "nigga" slur conditions. Additionally, although the two models including measures of participants' prejudice did not find a significant individual differences  $\times$  slur condition interaction, the trend was such that prejudice only significantly predicted perceived offensiveness when the "nigger" slur was used, such that higher levels of endorsement of negative Black stereotypes was related to lower levels of perceived offensiveness and higher levels of warmth toward Blacks was related to higher levels of perceived offensiveness. These findings suggest that individual differences in Whites' prejudice and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of racial prejudice are related to their judgments of the offensiveness of the use of racial slurs, especially for slurs that are perceived to be more offensive (e.g., "nigger"). Interestingly, these data also suggest that, even though some participants observed an antagonistic interracial interaction, prejudice and beliefs about the appropriateness of

**Table 2**  
Predictors of perceived offensiveness.

Predictor	Slur condition			
	"Buddy"	"Asshole"	"Nigga"	"Nigger"
Prejudice expressions justified Model $R^2 = .61^{**}$ Interaction $\Delta R^2 = .03^{**}$	0.05 <sub>a</sub>	0.04 <sub>a</sub>	0.07 <sub>a</sub>	-.48 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>
Suppress prejudice expressions Model $R^2 = .63^{**}$ Interaction $\Delta R^2 = .03^{**}$	<0.00 <sub>a</sub>	0.08 <sub>a</sub>	.37 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>	.45 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>
Cavalier racial humor Model $R^2 = .69^{**}$ Interaction $\Delta R^2 = .03^{**}$	-0.08 <sub>a</sub>	-.29 <sub>ab</sub> <sup>**</sup>	-.44 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>	-.46 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>
NFL N-word ban Model $R^2 = .69^{**}$ Interaction $\Delta R^2 = .04^{**}$	0.04 <sub>a</sub>	.16 <sub>a</sub> <sup>**</sup>	.45 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>	.41 <sub>b</sub> <sup>**</sup>
Endorse negative stereotypes Model $R^2 = .60^{**}$ Interaction $\Delta R^2 = .01$	-0.07 <sub>a</sub>	-0.02 <sub>a</sub>	-0.20 <sub>a</sub>	-.27 <sub>a</sub> <sup>*</sup>
Warmth toward Blacks <sup>1</sup> Model $R^2 = .62^{**}$ Interaction $\Delta R^2 = .01$	0.12 <sub>a</sub>	0.03 <sub>a</sub>	-0.02 <sub>a</sub>	.22 <sub>a</sub> <sup>*</sup>

Note. Slopes for each condition are given as unstandardized regression coefficients (<sup>1</sup>Warmth toward Blacks coefficients are standardized); for each predictor, coefficients that do not share a common subscript are significantly different between conditions ( $p < .05$ ).

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

expressions of racial prejudice were less related to judgments of offensiveness when the insult was not a racial slur (i.e., in the “asshole” condition) compared to when a racial slur was used. These findings suggest that when someone is targeted by blatant expressions of prejudice, such as arguably the worst racial slur, “nigger”, there is still some variability in White observers’ perceived offensiveness of such expressions. And, importantly, our results suggest that this variability is accounted for by White observers’ own prejudices and their beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice.

## 7. General discussion

The current studies examined how White third party observers’ perceptions of the offensiveness of racial ingroup members’ use of racial slurs vary as a function of the type of slur and the context in which it was expressed. Additionally, our research was among the first to examine how perceptions of offensiveness to racial slurs can be predicted by individual differences in beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice. More specifically, we manipulated the slur used by a White individual toward a Black individual and manipulated whether they were friends or strangers to examine how Whites’ perceptions of offensiveness varied and were related to beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice. Slurs have been shown to be perceived to be less offensive when used among individuals of the same group (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2013). A unique contribution of our current studies is that we examined whether certain situations in which a White individual uses a slur to target a Black individual may be perceived as less offensive and condemning. Consistent with our hypotheses and previous research examining the perceptions of racial slurs (Henry et al., 2014), results from both studies suggest that both the context as well as the specific racial slur used significantly impacts Whites’ perceptions of the offensiveness of racial slurs in third party observers. Across both studies, the “nigger” slur was judged to be more offensive than the “nigga” slur, and participants judged the slur targeted at a stranger to be more offensive than when it was targeted at a friend.

Study 2 replicated and extended previous research that has suggested that not all racial slurs and contexts in which they are used have the same magnitude of effects on observer reactions (Henry et al., 2014). Extending research on the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003), as well as research on how prejudiced attitudes affect perceptions of racial slur usage (Simon and Greenberg, 1996), our results showed that individuals differ in terms of the extent to which they believe expressions of prejudice are appropriate. Several individual difference measures provided converging evidence that individual differences in White participants’ prejudice toward Blacks (warmth toward Blacks, negative Black stereotype endorsement) and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice (beliefs that expressions of prejudice are justified or should be suppressed, cavalier racial humor beliefs, support for the NFL n-word ban) are related to the degree that observers judge racial slurs to be offensive. An important contribution of the current research is that it expands our understanding of perceptions of racial slurs by providing evidence that as the severity of racial slurs increases, individual differences in prejudice and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice more strongly predict the perceived offensiveness of the slur in White third party observers.

### 7.1. Limitations

We acknowledge that there are limitations to the current studies. First, our studies were conducted with vignettes as opposed to the events occurring in natural situations. As such, our observed effects may not have been as strong as compared to in-person situations in which participants directly observe a White perpetrator using a slur against a Black target. However, we felt that this was an appropriate way to examine the research question of interest. There are many situations in which individuals read about a racial slur being used and are put into the role of deciding how offensive the statement was and how to handle the situation. For example, human resource offices regularly evaluate situations in which prejudice may have occurred. It is the job of the individual(s) in charge to decide what happened and what the punishment should be for an act of prejudice which may include the usage of racial slurs. Additionally, our current design did not allow us to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between perceived offensiveness and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing racial prejudice. However, it is reasonable to assume that individuals’ prejudices and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing racial prejudice developed prior to participating in the current studies. Additionally, there was no evidence that these individual differences were affected by the manipulations of slur use in the current studies, suggesting that individuals’ beliefs and prejudices may have affected their perceived offensiveness of the racial slurs and not vice versa.

It should also be noted that the situation in which we manipulated the friend versus stranger context involved a potential confound in that this manipulation may have also primed competition versus cooperation (i.e., the target was on the same or different team in the vignette) which may have contributed to the effects. Regardless of whether our observed effects were due to the friend/stranger relationship between the actor and the target, or the competitive/cooperative nature of their relationship, we created situations in which the slur may be perceived as more affiliative (i.e., the friend condition) or more adversarial (i.e., the stranger condition), allowing us to examine how different social contexts would affect reactions to racial slurs. Thus, we would expect that these results would generalize to other situations such that perceptions of offensiveness of racial slurs will vary according to the situation as well as to the slur being used. Additionally, the term “nigger” is easily manipulated from explicit to ambiguous (from “nigger” to “nigga”) whereas other slurs may not be as easily manipulated. Considering our findings and the previously cited literature, however, we expect that these effects will generalize to other slurs such that certain terms may be regarded as more offensive than others. Our findings additionally suggest that beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressions of prejudice will be related to perceptions of the offensiveness of different slurs.



## 7.2. Implications and future directions

Despite these limitations, an important contribution of our study to the current literature is the finding that the offensiveness of racial slurs depends on observers' beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice. Interestingly, even though previous authors have asserted that the term "nigger" is the "filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23) or brings such negative connotations that many would feel ashamed for even hearing it (Croom, 2011), our measure of offensiveness did not reach ceiling for the term "nigger" as we suspected that it might. Our data showed that there was variability between participants in terms of how offensive they perceived the use of the word "nigger." In turn, this variability was significantly accounted for by individual differences in prejudice and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice such that individuals lower in prejudice or who more strongly believed that expressions of prejudice are inappropriate (e.g., not justified and should be suppressed) judged the "nigger" slur to be more offensive.

Also interesting was the substantial difference in perceptions of offensiveness between the term "nigger" and the term "nigga." Relating these results back to the debate about whether slurs operate as expressives or descriptors, we reasoned that our results provide general evidence that racial slurs may function as both expressives and descriptors. Semantically, "nigger" and "nigga" are the same, both providing descriptive information about the target such that they are Black. With each, however, comes additional negative pragmatic context. Both of these slurs were rated as generally negative. However, because "nigger" was rated higher than "nigga" in perceived offensiveness, our results support Croom's (2011, 2014) hypothesis that racial slurs may function as both descriptors and expressives because even though both "nigger" and "nigga" function as descriptors in describing an individual's skin color, each slur brings its own level of perceived offensiveness and thus may function additionally as an expressive. Additionally, future research should directly examine the possibility that individual differences in prejudice might be related to whether individuals perceive slurs to be primarily descriptive or expressive.

Additional research could also focus on how racial slur usage may be an expression of implicit prejudiced attitudes in different contexts. It would be interesting to examine whether the tendency to express prejudice by using a racial slur varies as a function of the racial slur used or the situation in which the slur is used. Consistent with our present findings, just as individuals may perceive slur usage as less offensive in situations that provide alternative interpretations of the intention behind the use of the slur, these same situations may cause more highly prejudiced individuals to be more likely to express prejudice by using a racial slur. For example, when individuals are able to more easily justify their intentions for using a slur, such as when it used between friends as opposed to strangers, the justification-suppression model of prejudice would predict that individuals with greater levels of implicit prejudice would be more likely to use a slur.

The effects of repeated and long term exposure to racial slurs also warrant future research. We suggest three possible accounts of the effects of repeated exposure to slur use that would be interesting to examine. It could be (as our data suggest) that individual differences relating to beliefs about the expression of prejudice affect how individuals perceive racial slur usage such that individuals who believe expressions of prejudice to be more appropriate interpret racial slur use as less offensive. On the other hand, and consistent with prejudiced norm theory (Ford and Ferguson, 2004), perceptions of offensiveness across repeated exposures to slur usage may affect beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice by loosening or tightening perceptions of social norms about expressions of prejudice. Finally, individual differences in prejudice and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice may interact with repeated exposure to slur use and strengthen or weaken individuals' prior dispositions toward expressions of prejudice.

## 8. Conclusion

Consistent with contemporary theories and research on racial slurs, our research provided further evidence that contextual factors as well as types of racial slurs significantly impact perceptions of offensiveness by White third party observers of a slur being used by a racial ingroup member to target a Black individual. Across two studies, the "nigger" slur was judged to be more offensive than the "nigga" slur, and observers judged the slur targeted at a stranger to be more offensive than when it was targeted at a friend. Unique to the current studies was the finding that the level of perceived offensiveness to slur use was related to individuals' prejudice toward Blacks and beliefs about the appropriateness of expressing prejudice. Specifically, individuals who reported higher levels of prejudice and appropriateness of expressing prejudice also reported being less offended by the use of racial slurs. In conclusion, our findings suggest that observers' reactions to racial slurs depend on the type of slur and context in which the slur is used, as well as on observers' prejudices toward the targeted racial group and their beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice.

## Appendix A. Perceived offensiveness items

1. This type of language is normal. (R)
2. This type of language is offensive.
3. I do not agree with using language like this in any situation.
4. It is okay to use this type of language in certain situations. (R)
5. It is surprising to hear this type of language.

6. Alex was just caught up in the moment. He did not mean anything bad. (R)
7. This language is justified. (R)
8. Alex should be punished for what he said.
9. This type of language is anti-social.
10. The use of this language encourages prejudice.

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