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THE EFFECT OF SYMBOLS AND MEDIA FRAMING ON EMOTION, ATTITUDE CHANGE, AND ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Antonia Drummond

Mentor: James Gibson

Americans are constantly inundated with news stories and images from the media, yet we know little about how such exposure influences attitudes. Extant literature has shown significant correlations between attitude change and text framing, as well as between attitude formation and image presentation. However, the literature on framing in news stories is inconclusive and almost never includes the effects of image presentation. This study attempted to analyze the effects of images and textual framing when the two are paired together—a common news media format. Respondents were presented with either an episodic or thematic vignette about the display of Confederate symbols in the United States, paired with either a “positive” or “negative” image of a Confederate flag rally, or with no image. I measured respondents’ emotional engagement, attribution of responsibility, and attitude change between conditions. I hypothesized that respondents in image conditions would have the strongest emotional reactions, that respondents in thematic conditions would be most likely to attribute societal responsibility to preventing violence against African Americans, and that high emotional engagement and societal attributions of responsibility would lead to attitude change toward opposition to the display of Confederate symbols. This study has two main findings. First, images may not have as strong of effects as predicted. Secondly, the effects of demographic variables showed that news stories may serve to reinforce, rather than change, attitudes. Contrary to my hypotheses, I found that episodic text, regardless of image, was most likely to elicit engagement in some emotions among respondents. However, societal attributions of responsibility did lead to attitude change toward opposition to Confederate symbols, as did reported sadness and hope.