To be, or not to be...Black: The effects of racial codeswitching on perceived professionalism in the workplace∗

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ABSTRACT

Black people engage in a variety of behaviors to avoid stereotyping and promote a professional image in the workplace. Racial codeswitching is one impression management strategy where Black people adjust their self-presentation to receive desirable outcomes (e.g., perceived professionalism) through mirroring the norms, behaviors, and attributes of the dominant group (i.e., White people) in specific contexts. In this study, we examine whether racial codeswitching enhances perceived professionalism for Black employees. We investigate Black and White participants’ perceptions of racial codeswitching and subsequent evaluations of professionalism through manipulating three behaviors (e.g., adjusting style of speech, name selection, hairstyle) of a fictitious Black coworker in two, between-subjects experimental studies using audio and written stimuli. Results indicate that employees who engage in racial codeswitching are consistently perceived as more professional by both Black and White participants compared to employees who do not codeswitch (Studies 1 & 2). We also found that Black participants perceive the non-codeswitching employee as more professional than White participants (Studies 2a & 2b). Black and White participants’ evaluation of specific codeswitching behaviors varied with both groups supporting adjustment of speech, opposing adjusting one’s name, and diverging on wearing natural hairstyles (Studies 1 & 2). Although racial codeswitching is presented as an impression management strategy, it may reinforce White professional standards and generate social and psychological costs for Black employees. Implications of our work for impression management and impression formation are further discussed.

1. Introduction

In the film Sorry to Bother You, protagonist Cassius Green struggles to make sales as a telemarketer. He is encouraged by a seasoned Black employee to use his “White voice” when communicating with potential customers, which exponentially improves his sales and career trajectory. Although this film exaggerates the linkage between Cassius’s ability to adjust his voice with his work-related success, codeswitching—the temporary “switching on” or adjustment of behaviors to optimize the comfort of others in exchange for a desired outcome ((Anicich and Hirsh, 1998; Dickens & Chavez, 2017; McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith II, & Durkee, 2019; Molinsky, 2007)—has long been a strategy for Black people to excel in White cultural spaces (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Ibarra, 1995; Roberts, 2005). The presumption that a “White sounding voice” is also a preferred manner of speaking further associates Whiteness with professionalism, creating a dilemma for Black people who desire to be seen as a professional. Previous studies have found that presenting (or pretending to present) one’s authentic self enhances career outcomes and work-related well-being (Cha et al., 2019; Klotz et al., 2018; Moore, Lee, Kim, & Cable, 2017; Roulin & Kring, 2020), but members of marginalized groups tend to fare better when they adjust their self-presentation and manage other’s perceptions of their stigmatized identity (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017; Roberts, Cha, & Kim, 2014; Roberts, Settles, & Jellison, 2008). Our paper extends work on impression formation for individuals with visibly stigmatized identities by examining perceptions of racial codeswitching in professional

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settings. Specifically, we measure intragroup (e.g., Black people) and intergroup (e.g., White people) evaluations of codeswitching and perceptions of professionalism for Black people who do (not) codeswitch in the workplace.

Black employees in majority White spaces benefit from being perceived as a professional in these settings. Professionalism broadly refers to an individual possessing specialized knowledge, character, and capacity to meet the technical and social demands of their profession (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Roberts, 2005) and is bestowed upon those who reflect the values and norms of their professional community (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Demonstrating these values and norms extend beyond one’s work output into their self-presentation including ways of speaking and communicating, physical appearance, and having interests that symbolize one’s membership in the profession (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Pratt et al., 2006). Being perceived as a professional generates respect in one’s field, status, power, and access to networks (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006; Roberts, 2005), making it a desirable outcome for employees in white-collar occupations.

Perceptions of professionalism are enhanced when individuals share similar characteristics with a majority of others in their profession (Ashcraft, 2013; Essed & Goldberg, 2002; Hall, Hall, Galinsky, & Phillips, 2019; Ibarra, 1995). White men in Western countries have historically held the power and authority to shape the norms of professionalism given their overrepresentation in managerial, white-collar occupations (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Indeed, White men’s values and norms come to ‘define’ the occupations that they hold (Ashcraft, 2013; Carton and Rosette, 2011) including their interests and hobbies (e.g., golfing), standards of appearance and dress, dialect and style of speech, and the prevalence of specific names (e.g., John) for individuals in professional spaces (Essed, 2002; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008; Wolters, 2015). Individuals from underrepresented groups may feel pressure to adjust their self-presentation in adherence to these norms so that they may access professional spaces and be conceived as a professional (Brown-Iannuzzi, Payne, & Trawalter, 2013; DiTomaso, 2015; Rivera, 2012).

The “effectiveness” of racial codeswitching in professional settings hinges on how well it is received by others. In other words, will observers of codeswitching perceive that these behavioral changes are necessary to exhibit professionalism in a workplace context? We use two experimental paradigms to capture how observers perceive the professionalism of Black employees who either codeswitch or do not codeswitch at work. Studies show that individuals are aware of (and generally dislike) inauthentic displays at work (Grandey, Houston III, & Avery, 2019; Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Moore et al., 2017), yet the race of the observer may also play a role in these evaluations (Houston III, Grandey, & Sawyer, 2018). Thus, we empirically test whether intragroup observers (e.g., Black people) evaluate specific racial codeswitching behaviors differently than intergroup observers (e.g., White people). Collectively, our work extends scholarship that incorporates a racial lens in impression management research (Dupree & Fiske, 2019; Swencionis, Dupree, & Fiske, 2017), ultimately deepening our understanding of Black people’s experiences in social contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Origins of racial codeswitching

Codeswitching as a concept emerged in linguistic studies to describe language fluency or the use of multiple languages within a single conversation (Barker, 1947; Weinreich, 1953). Cultural “frame-switching” further identifies the cognitive flexibility of individuals who adapt and shift their language and cognition based on their experiences living in multiple cultures (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Cheng, Lee, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008; Haritatos & Benet-Martínez, 2002). Sociolinguists acknowledge the interpersonal elements of codeswitching as encompassing the social and cultural functions of adjusting one’s language use (Goffman, 1981; Nilep, 2006) instead of merely an “interference between languages” (Vogt, 1954, p. 368). Specifically, codeswitching considers the use of different dialects, language combinations, and mannerisms to indicate formal and informal interactions within and between social groups (Baugh, 2003; Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1958).

Central to this latter conceptualization of codeswitching is the role of social contexts in determining how individuals present themselves. We assert that Black people in the U.S. are likely to engage in racial codeswitching in professional workplaces given their severe underrepresentation in professional occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018) and consistent experiences with discrimination, stereotyping, and systemic barriers (Avery, Volpone, & Holmes IV, 2018; Golella, Hebl, & King, 2017; Dupree, Torrez, Obiha, & Fiske, 2021; Rosette, Akinola, & Ma, 2016). Perceptions that Black employees are incompetent and angry hinder their progression in workplaces (Grandey et al., 2019; He, Kang, Tse, & Toh, 2019). In order to advance in professional roles, Black people might temporarily replace the tendency to present themselves in a ‘Black’ way by adjusting how they “dress, think, act, and express themselves...[to] optimize the comfort of the person, group or institution” (Cross & Strauss, 1998, p. 273) in exchange for fair treatment, employment opportunities, and quality service (Cross Jr, Smith, & Payne, 2002; Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

There is evidence of Black people changing their self-expression to achieve a desired outcome in organizations (Roberts, 2005). For example, Kang, DeCelles, Tileisk, and Jun (2016) found that Black job applicants ‘whiten’ their résumé by using White-sounding names and removing markers of racial and cultural activities to increase their chances of being hired. Research also shows that Black people from middle- and upper-class backgrounds reduce the use of colloquialisms and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to promote perceptions of competence and to receive fair treatment (Brett & Weldon, 2015; Lacy, 2007; Scott, 2013). Additionally, Black people face societal pressure to chemically straighten their hair to match Eurocentric standards of beauty, and by doing so, are more likely to receive job offers and job stability in return for appearing ‘professional’ (Koval & Rosette, 2021; Roberts & Roberts, 2007; Rosette & Dumas, 2007). Thus, Black people may benefit by ‘switching off’ their stigmatized racial identities at work if they desire to exude professionalism.

2.2. The costs of (Not) codeswitching at work

The decision to codeswitch or not elicits numerous costs. Codeswitching requires Black people to suppress their cultural identity, which is emotionally, psychologically, and physically exhausting (Grandey et al., 2019; Hewlin, 2009; Hewlin & Broomes, 2019; Wingfield, 2007). Sustained engagement in this form of impression management could erode Black people’s well-being and lower commitment to their organization (McCluney et al., 2019). Further, Black employees could limit their creativity at work by promoting the values and norms of the dominant group through codeswitching instead of tapping into their own cultural resources (Cha & Roberts, 2019; Roberts & Cha, 2016). Black employees may also unwittingly reinforce White norms and culture as professional through codeswitching, generating a pernicious cycle where codeswitching becomes an expected pathway to advancing in certain occupations.

Choosing not to codeswitch may also affect the career trajectory for Black employees in professional spaces. Decades of research continually find that companies demonstrate bias towards Black-sounding names when evaluating prospective hires and determining salary compensation (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Mithani & Murphy, 2017), and these effects are not mitigated by companies who have diversity statements or diverse leadership (Kang et al., 2016; Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2012). In addition, Grogger (2011) found that voices that were distinctly recognized as Black from a primarily White sample of college students
were perceived as less competent and receive lower wages in comparison to similarly educated Black employees whose speech reflects standard American English (Grogger, 2011). Further, Black women who wear their hair in natural styles are penalized for violating professional norms, especially in industries with strong dress norms (Koval & Rosette, 2021). Further, Opie and Phillips (2015) found that Black evaluators gave higher penalties to Black women job candidates with natural hairstyles compared to White evaluators. Such judgment of natural hairstyles have led to loss of employment or removal from higher education programs (Byrd & Tharp, 2014; Onwuachi-Willig, 2010). Thus, weighing the costs to codeswitch or not poses a dilemma for Black people who want to be perceived as professional in a society dominated by White cultural norms.

Implicit assumptions of professionalism derive from White cultural norms and shape evaluations for others. For instance, recruiters rated individuals who were dressed appropriately and “had properly combed hair” (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009) as more professional and competent. Instructing participants to imagine how an ideal employee speaks, dresses, and behaves increased preferences for and selection of a White job candidate over a Black job candidate (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2013). Black women with natural, curly hairstyles are perceived as less professional than Black and White women with straightened hair, which predicted lower rating of competence and recommendations for interviews (Koval & Rosette, 2021). In light of these findings, Black employees are especially encouraged to adjust their mannerisms, speech, and appearance not only so they appear more professional, but also to overcome stereotypes of incompetence (Swencionis et al., 2017). Observers who conflate White standards of professionalism with competence are likely to associate Black employees who codeswitch as more professional.

2.3. Intragroup and intergroup evaluations of racial codeswitching

The enactment of racial codeswitching implies that Black people are aware of behaviors that are necessary to achieve a desirable outcome in particular settings. In work settings, Black people may find themselves as one of a few non-White employees (Gee, 2018) enhancing concerns of exhibiting stereotypes that would hamper their career trajectory (Swencionis et al., 2017). Members of the dominant group (e.g., White people) tend to rely on stereotypes to make judgments of lower-status groups (Schmidt & Nosek, 2010), because limited intergroup interaction significantly reduces opportunities to challenge the accuracy of stereotypes. As such, White people may consider their own behavior, appearance, and values as normative (Chrobot-Mason, Campbell, & Vason, 2020) and judge other groups based on how well they embody these characteristics (Koval & Rosette, 2021). Behaviors that are considered stereotypically ‘Black’ (e.g., use of AAVE, natural hairstyles) tend to be negatively judged by White observers (Leonard & Locke, 1993; Maddox, 2004; Popp, Donovan, Crawford, Marsh, & Peele, 2003). Thus, Black people who choose not to codeswitch in the workplace may be negatively evaluated by intergroup (i.e., White) observers.

Although Black cultural expressions are devalued in professional workspaces, Black people may value cultural displays associated with their racial identity. People in general have an innate desire to develop social connections with similar others (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and therefore rely on group members to demonstrate the appropriate behaviors, norms, and expressions to be considered a prototypical member of this group (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Empirical evidence supports this notion for Black individuals. Black people positively evaluate the use of AAVE and natural hair styles (Asat, Moran, & Bar-Anan, 2018; Durkee & Williams, 2015), and perceive intragroup members who are familiar with Black cultural norms as culturally authentic (Durkee, Gazley, Hope, & Keels, 2019). Engaging in racial codeswitching might, therefore, elicit negative responses from Black people if they perceive that these behaviors violate intragroup norms (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1998). Black people who are perceived as disconnected or less prototypical members of their racial group elicit less empathy and solidarity from other Black people (Johnson & Ashburn-Nardo, 2014; Johnson & Kaiser, 2013), and may be accused of “acting White” (Durkee & Williams, 2015(Neal-Barnett et al., 2010)). Choosing to codeswitch may therefore elicit backlash from Black observers, suggesting that the “success” of racial codeswitching is contingent on the race of the observer.

2.4. Hypotheses development and present studies

In this study, we examine how racial codeswitching influences perceptions of Black people’s professionalism. The experimental studies within this paper focus on a fictitious Black lawyer who does or does not engage in racial codeswitching in the workplace. The majority of lawyers in the U.S. are White men (Ely, 1995; Pearce, Wald, & Ballakrishnen, 2014) and Black lawyers are severely underrepresented in this occupation, perceptibly through the reproduction of cultural homophily (Woodson, 2015). Additionally, Black lawyers continue to experience a significant amount of bias and discrimination (Melaku, 2019; Wilkins & Pong, 2019; Zraiek, 2014) and are more likely to behave inauthentically in this profession compared to other professions (Hewlin & Broomes, 2010). We, therefore, presume that racial codeswitching is a common strategy for Black lawyers and a realistic context to measure perceptions of this impression management strategy.

Racial codeswitching is deemed effective if observers evaluate the behaviors as professional. Thus, we measure how both Black and White observers evaluate a fictional Black lawyer codeswitching or not codeswitching in a hypothetical law firm. We hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Perceived professionalism of the fictional Black coworker will be evaluated differently based on the race of the observer.

1a: Black participants will evaluate a non-codeswitching Black coworker as more professional than White participants.

1b: White participants will evaluate a codeswitching Black coworker as more professional than Black participants.

We further predict that Black and White observers will have differential levels of agreement in the ways that a Black professional may codeswitch:

**Hypothesis 2.** Black and White participants will evaluate codeswitching differently across three behaviors (e.g., name selection, style of speech, and hairstyle).

2a: Black participants will evaluate a non-codeswitching Black coworker more positively across the three behaviors than White participants.

2b: White participants will evaluate a codeswitching Black coworker more positively across the three behaviors than Black participants.

In order to isolate racial codeswitching from other visible identities that generate stereotyping (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007), we separated our studies by gender. We are aware that gender and race may generate different evaluations of Black people’s professionalism (e.g., Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston, 2016) which may detract from the focus on racial codeswitching. Investigating these processes within gender-matched groups strengthens our understanding of codeswitching as one of many racial dilemmas affecting Black people in organizations.

Finally, we use multiple stimuli to test racial codeswitching. In Study 1, we examine the perceptions of Black and White participants after listening to a “voicemail” recording from a fictitious Black man (Study 1a) or Black woman coworker (Study 1b) discussing their experiences of codeswitching or not codeswitching at a hypothetical law firm (see the script in the Supplemental Materials). Listeners tend to accurately identify the race of speakers from hearing their voice (Baugh, 2003; Kushins, 2014) and make automatic judgments about the speaker’s warmth and competence (Pietri, Johnson, Majid, & Chu, 2021; Schroeder & Epley, 2015) based on perceived social identity (Kraus, Torrez, Park, & G imply, 2019). However, prior research has not focused on the demographic characteristics of listeners/observers to
determine whether individuals’ race influences their perceptions of voices. Given the differing ways that Black and White listeners may react to codeswitching, we anticipate that the voicemail stimuli will elicit different responses from our participants. We adapt the priming stimuli from Study 1 to a written transcript of the voicemail recording in Study 2. We present this transcript to participants in the form of an email sent from a Black man (Study 2a) or Black woman coworker (Study 2b). In both studies, participants are given similar instructions to evaluate the professionalism and acceptability of the hypothetical coworker’s behavioral practices.

3. Study 1 Method

We tested Hypothesis 1 using a between-subjects, vignette design. Our main stimuli consisted of a voicemail recording from a fictitious Black coworker at a hypothetical law firm. We manipulated whether the character in the vignette describes codeswitching or not codeswitching across three behaviors. Participants then evaluated the characters’ behavior and perceived professionalism based on the voicemail. Black and White men evaluated the fictitious Black man coworker in Study 1a, and Black and White women evaluated the fictitious Black woman coworker in Study 2a.

3.1. Participants

We recruited 498 self-identified Black and White women and men through CloudResearch, a panel platform that screens participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Of those participants, 184 were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria for the study or failing to answer at least one attention check (e.g., failing to recall the coworker’s name in the voicemail). To qualify for the study, two levels of demographic screening were performed to confirm that each participant met the criteria for the study in terms of race (Black or White) and gender (woman or man) first by Cloud Research’s tool kit of previously collected demographics and again in the demographic questionnaire at the beginning of this online survey. The final sample (N = 143; N = 171) consisted of roughly equal numbers of Black (n = 78; n = 86) and White (n = 65; n = 85) participants. Based on sensitivity power analyses conducted with G*Power, the sample sizes for Study 1a and 1b provided a power of 0.80 to detect an interaction effect size of f = 0.24 (η² = 0.05) and f = 0.22 (η² = 0.04), respectively. Participants in each study were compensated $1.00 for their participation, which required less than 10 min. Both studies used a 2 × 2 between-subjects design with participants’ race (Black or White) and manipulation of the voicemail recording (codeswitching or non-codeswitching) as the two independent variables.

3.2. Procedure

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the study so that we could randomly assign roughly equal numbers of Black and White participants to either condition. Participants were also gender-matched with the hypothetical Black coworker so that Study 1a participants were all men and Study 1b participants were all women. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves as a recently hired lawyer at a law firm in a large metropolitan city. They were told that the study was designed to capture their first impressions of a hypothetical coworker. Next, participants were instructed to listen to a voicemail from the coworker, a 3rd year associate at the law firm named Lamar Matthew Jackson (Study 1a) or La Keisha Renee Jackson (Study 1b). In the voicemail, Lamar/La Keisha shared advice on the “unspoken ways to succeed at the firm.” For the codeswitching manipulation, we varied the sound of the fictitious coworkers’ voice as well as a verbal description of their preferred name choice, hairstyle, and style of speech in order to demonstrate an overall profile of a coworker who either engaged in codeswitching or did not codeswitch within the workplace. The voicemails for each study were pilot tested prior to primary data collection to ensure accuracy of the perceived race for the voices and comprehension for a valid manipulation (see our manipulation materials in Appendix A). After completing the attention checks, participants were asked to share their general impressions of Lamar/La Keisha through an open-ended question (e.g., What are your general impressions of how Lamar/La Keisha attempts to fit in at work?) and evaluate their perceived professionalism and likelihood of succeeding at this law firm.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Perceived professionalism

We used two single-item measures to capture perceptions of professionalism and likelihood of success. The first item asked, “How professional is Lamar/La Keisha?” on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Very unprofessional to 6 = Very professional). The second item asked, “How likely is Lamar/La Keisha to succeed at this law firm?” on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Very unlikely to 6 = Very likely). These items were highly correlated (Study 1a: r(143) = 0.71, p < .001; Study 1b: r(171) = 0.65, p < .001), therefore we combined them to create an overall measure of perceived professionalism.

4. Study 1 Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for our primary variables are presented in Table 1. On average, Black men (M = 33.80, SD = 11.29) were younger than the White men (M = 41.86, SD = 12.52; Study 1a: t(141) = 4.05, p < .001, d = 0.68), and Black women reported a lower household income than White women (Study 1b: t(169) = 2.14, p = .03, d = 0.33). We therefore controlled for age and household income in our analyses.

To test our hypothesis, we implemented a 2 (participants’ race: Black or White) × 2 (study condition: codeswitching or non-codeswitching) between-subjects design. We used analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to examine the interaction between the study conditions and participants’ race on perceived professionalism (Hypothesis 1) in Study 1a and 1b.

4.1. Perceived professionalism

We hypothesized that Black participants would evaluate the non-codeswitching employee as more professional than White participants, and that White participants would evaluate the codeswitching employee as more professional than Black participants. Contrary to our prediction, we did not find a significant interaction between participants’ race and study condition in either Study 1a or 1b (F Study 1a (1, 137) = 0.83, p = .36, η² = 0.01 and F Study 1b (1, 165) = 0.64, p = .42, η² = 0.004, respectively; see Fig. 1). However, we found a significant main effect of study condition on perceived professionalism in both studies (F Study 1a (1, 137) = 12.58, p < .001, η² = 0.08; F Study 1b (1, 165) = 8.05, p = .005, η² = 0.05). Specifically, Black and White participants similarly viewed the codeswitching coworker (M Study 1a = 5.50, SD Study 1a = 0.63; M Study 1b = 5.39, SD Study 1b = 0.94) as more professional than the non-codeswitching coworker (M Study 1a = 5.03, SD Study 1a = 0.92; M Study 1b = 4.98, SD Study 1b = 0.99).

5. Study 1 Discussion

In Study 1, a significant main effect for racial codeswitching among men (Study 1a) and women (Study 1b) indicate that the codeswitching Black coworker was perceived as more professional than the non-codeswitching Black coworker. This finding is supported by prior work demonstrating that impression management strategies that reduce associations with stigmatized groups (e.g., Black racial identity) positively enhances how Black employees are perceived and evaluated in the workplace (Roberts, 2005; Roberts et al., 2014). However, contrary to
B. Similarly perceived the Black coworker who engaged in racial codeswitching, particularly when evaluating positive characteristics such as intellect and likeability (Pietri et al., 2021; Schroeder & Epley, 2015). Listeners also tend to associate stereotypes to voices sounding more like a Black person than the codeswitching voice (see Appendix A). Thus, participants might have attributed negative stereotypes to the voices in the non-codeswitching condition which could have affected their evaluation of the fictitious coworker’s professionalism.

It is possible that the audio stimuli used in the voicemail recordings may have led participants to focus heavily on the sound of the coworker’s voice and consequently pay less attention to the other codeswitching behaviors described in the voicemail recording. People tend to form immediate impressions of others based on brief exposure to their voice (Kraus et al., 2019), particularly when evaluating positive characteristics such as intellect and likeability (Pietri et al., 2021; Schroeder & Epley, 2015). Listeners also tend to associate stereotypes to voices based on their presumed racial identity (Baugh, 2003; Hudley, 2013; Kushins, 2014), and the non-codeswitching voice was perceived as sounding more like a Black person than the codeswitching voice (see Appendix A). Thus, participants might have attributed negative stereotypes to the voices in the non-codeswitching condition which could have affected their evaluation of the fictitious coworker’s professionalism.

In light of these findings, we sought to reduce the potential influence of a person’s voice in Study 2. We, therefore, transcribed the content of the voicemail recordings from Study 1 into a written email sent to study participants by the same fictitious Black coworker from a hypothetical law firm. We additionally sought to measure the extent to which participants agreed with each specific codeswitching behavior described in the email they received from a Black coworker (e.g., name selection, style of speech, hairstyle) in Study 2. This level of detail allows us to determine whether specific codeswitching behaviors are perceived positively or negatively by Black and White people.

6. Study 2 Methods

The aim of Study 2 was to assess Black and White people’s perceptions of racial codeswitching and professionalism. We used a similar methodology as Study 1, but replaced the voicemail recordings with a written email sent to participants by a fictitious Black coworker at a hypothetical law firm. We additionally sought to measure the extent to which participants agreed with each specific codeswitching behavior described in the email they received from a Black coworker (e.g., name selection, style of speech, hairstyle). The email was then evaluated by Black (i.e., intragroup members) and White participants (i.e., intergroup members).

6.1. Participants

We recruited 670 self-identified Black and White women and men through Cloud Research to complete a 10 min survey about impression formation. We excluded 220 respondents because they did not meet the eligibility criteria for the study (participants who did not identify as a Black man/woman or a White man/woman) or failed the attention checks (e.g., failing to recall the coworker’s name). The final sample (N_{Study 2a} = 222; N_{Study 2b} = 228) consisted of roughly equal numbers of Black (N_{Study 2a} = 104; N_{Study 2b} = 119) and White (N_{Study 2a} = 118; N_{Study 2b} = 109) participants. Based on sensitivity power analyses conducted with G*Power, the sample sizes for Study 2a and 2b both provided a power of 0.80 to detect an interaction effect size of f = 0.13 (η^2 = 0.03). Participants in each study were compensated $1.00 for their participation. Both studies were a 2 × 2 between-subjects design with participants’ race (Black or White) and the coworker’s behavior (codeswitching or non-codeswitching) as the two independent variables.

6.2. Procedure

We followed a similar procedure as Study 1 with the exception that...
participants read an email about a Black coworker’s experience codeswitching or not codeswitching at a hypothetical law firm instead of listening to a voicemail from the coworker. Participants were once again gender-matched with the coworker so that Study 2a participants were all men and Study 2b participants were all women. The emails in each study were pilot tested prior to primary data collection to ensure accuracy and comprehension for a valid manipulation (see manipulation in Appendix B). We also included an additional set of questions examining the extent to which participants agreed with the coworker’s behavior across three specific behaviors of racial codeswitching (i.e., name selection, style of speech, hairstyle).

6.3. Measures

6.3.1. Perceived professionalism

We used the same two items from Study 1 to measure perceived professionalism. As in Study 1, these items were highly correlated (Study 2a: r(214) = 0.76, p < .001; Study 2b: r(227) = 0.86, p < .001), therefore we combined these two items to create an overall measure of perceived professionalism.

6.3.2. Perceptions of racial codeswitching

Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with Lamar’s/ La Keisha’s behavior across three domains of racial codeswitching (i.e., preferred name choice, style of speech, and hairstyle) using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

6.3.3. Manipulation check

We used a modified version of the Authenticity Scale (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) as a manipulation check to confirm that participants perceived Lamar/La Keisha’s behavior in the codeswitching condition as less authentic than the non-codeswitching condition. This scale is comprised of three subscales: authentic living (i.e., being true to one’s values and beliefs; Study 2a α = 0.91; Study 2b α = 0.93), accepting external influences (i.e., conforming to the expectations of others; Study 2a α = 0.95; Study 2b α = 0.96), and self-alienation (i.e., feeling out of touch with one’s true self; Study 2a α = 0.89; Study 2b α = 0.90). Each subscale contains four items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Does not describe him/her at all to 7 = Describes him/her very well).

7. Study 2 Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for our primary variables are presented in Table 2. On average, Black participants (Study 2a: M = 34.80, SD = 9.95; Study 2b: M = 37.09, SD = 10.75) were younger than the White participants (Study 2a: M = 39.19, SD = 11.71; Study 2b: M = 40.94; SD = 11.38; Study 2a: t(220) = 2.99, p < .003, d = 0.40; Study 2b: t(226) = 2.63, p = .01, d = 0.35, and Black women reported a lower household income than White women (Study 2b: t(226) = 4.37, p < .001, d = 0.58). We therefore controlled for age and household income in our analyses. Independent sample t-tests comparing study conditions confirmed our manipulation check; participants perceived the coworker who codeswitched as less authentic than the non-codeswitching coworker. Significant differences were found for all three dimensions of the Authenticity scale in the expected directions (Study 2a: authentic living (t(209) = 13.41, p < .001, d = 1.85), accepting external influences (t(209) = −13.70, p < .001, d = 1.89), self-alienation (t(209) = −6.32, p < .001, d = 0.87)); Study 2b: authentic living (t(224) = 17.10, p < .001, d = 2.28), accepting external influences (t(224) = −16.81, p < .001, d = 2.24), and self-alienation (t(224) = −8.82, p < .001, d = 1.17).

To test our hypotheses, we implemented a 2 (participants’ race: Black or White) x 2 (study condition: codeswitching or non-codeswitching) between-subjects design. In Study 2a and 2b, we used analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to examine the interaction between the study conditions and participants’ race on perceived professionalism (Hypothesis 1) and evaluations of specific codeswitching behaviors: name selection, style of speech, and hairstyle (Hypothesis 2). Bonferroni adjustments were used to assess post hoc comparisons.

7.1. Perceived professionalism

In Hypothesis 1, we predicted that Black participants would evaluate the non-codeswitching coworker as more professional than White participants, and that White participants would evaluate the codeswitching coworker as more professional than Black participants. In Study 2a, we found a significant interaction between study condition and participants’ race (F(1, 208) = 6.19, p = .014, ηp2 = 0.03). As shown in Fig. 2, Black men (M = 4.63, SD = 1.07) perceived the non-codeswitching coworker as more professional than White men (M = 4.08, SD = 1.11; F(1, 208) = 7.31, p = .007, ηp2 = 0.03). However, White (M = 5.16, SD = 0.76) and Black men (M = 5.10, SD = 0.85; F(1, 208) = 0.60, p = .44, ηp2 = 0.003) did not differ in the extent to which they thought the codeswitching coworker was professional. Lastly, White (F(1, 208) = 38.02, p < .001, ηp2 = 0.16) and Black men (F(1, 208) = 6.15, p = .014, ηp2 = 0.03) perceived the codeswitching coworker as more professional than the non-codeswitching coworker. We also found a significant interaction between participants’ race and study condition in Study 2b (F(1,221) = 10.75, p = .001, ηp2 = 0.05).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conditions (0 – non-codeswitching, 1 = codeswitching)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>−0.36**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Name Agreement</td>
<td>−0.54**</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>(1.43)</td>
<td>(3.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Style of Speech Agreement</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>(3.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hair Agreement</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>−0.21**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>(3.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Perceived Professionalism</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.39**</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>(4.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Participants’ Race (0 – White, 1 = Black)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>−0.17**</td>
<td>−0.28**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Age</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>−0.15*</td>
<td>−0.20**</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>37.13</td>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>(38.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. SES</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>(3.29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Correlations for Study 2a are shown below the diagonal and correlations for Study 2b are shown above the diagonal. Means and standard deviations for Study 2b are in parentheses. SES = socioeconomic status.
As shown in Fig. 3, Black women ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.09$) perceived the non-codeswitching coworker as more professional than White women ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.29$; $F(1, 221) = 8.85, p = .003, \eta^2_p = 0.04$). However, White ($M = 5.25, SD = 0.70$) and Black women ($M = 4.99, SD = 1.16$; $F(1, 221) = 2.29, p = .13, \eta^2_p = 0.01$) did not differ in the extent to which they thought the codeswitching coworker was professional. Lastly, both Black ($F(1, 221) = 6.13, p = .014, \eta^2_p = 0.03$) and White women ($F(1, 221) = 47.59, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.18$) perceived the codeswitching coworker as more professional than the non-codeswitching employee.

### 7.2. Perceptions of racial codeswitching

We hypothesized that White participants would be more likely to agree with codeswitching behaviors than Black participants, and that Black participants would be more likely to agree with non-codeswitching behaviors than White participants. We examined evaluations of racial codeswitching across three behaviors: name selection, style of speech, and hairstyle. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find a significant interaction for name selection ($F_{Study \ 2a} (1, 207) = 0.15, p = .70, \eta^2_p = 0.001$; $F_{Study \ 2b} (1, 220) = 0.10, p = .76, \eta^2_p < 0.001$) nor style of speech across Study 2a or 2b ($F_{Study \ 2a} (1, 208) = 0.01, p = .95, \eta^2_p < 0.001$; $F_{Study \ 2b} (1, 221) = 0.01, p = .93, \eta^2_p < 0.001$). However, we found a significant main effect of study condition for name selection ($F_{Study \ 2a} (1, 207) = 86.25, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.29$; $F_{Study \ 2b} (1, 221) = 117.55, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.35$) and style of speech ($F_{Study \ 2a} (1, 208) = 23.38, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.10$; $F_{Study \ 2b} (1, 221) = 72.49, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.25$) across both studies. Specifically, participants agreed more with the non-codeswitching name selection ($M_{Study \ 2a} = 4.26, SD_{Study \ 2a} = 0.93$; $M_{Study \ 2b} = 4.39, SD_{Study \ 2b} = 0.97$) than the codeswitching name selection ($M_{Study \ 2a} = 2.73, SD_{Study \ 2a} = 1.43$; $M_{Study \ 2b} = 2.68, SD_{Study \ 2b} = 1.36$). In contrast, participants agreed more with the codeswitching style of speech ($M_{Study \ 2a} = 4.18, SD_{Study \ 2a} = 0.92$; $M_{Study \ 2b} = 4.26, SD_{Study \ 2b} = 1.02$) than the non-codeswitching style of speech ($M_{Study \ 2a} = 3.48, SD_{Study \ 2a} = 1.17$; $M_{Study \ 2b} = 2.90, SD_{Study \ 2b} = 1.35$).

Next, we examined participants’ agreement with the coworker’s hairstyle selection. We did not find a significant interaction between participants’ race and study condition in Study 2a ($F(1, 208) = 1.48, p = .23, \eta^2_p = 0.01$). However, we did find a main effect for study condition ($F(1, 208) = 10.06, p = .002, \eta^2_p = 0.05$) such that Black and White men agreed more strongly with the codeswitching hairstyle ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.05$) than the non-codeswitching hairstyle ($M = 3.12, SD = 1.10$). Contrary to Study 2a, we found a significant interaction between participants’ race and study condition for hairstyle selection in Study 2b ($F(1, 221) = 32.24, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.13$). Specifically, Black women ($M = 4.30, SD = 0.88$) agreed more strongly with the non-codeswitching hairstyle than White women ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.10$; $F(1, 221) = 20.48, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.09$), and White women ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.09$) agreed more strongly with the codeswitching hairstyle than Black women ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.23$; $F(1, 221) = 10.71, p = .001, \eta^2_p = 0.05$; see Fig. 4). Within each racial group, we found that Black women agreed more strongly with the non-codeswitching (vs. codeswitching) hairstyle ($F(1, 221) = 43.81, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.17$), but White women did not differ in how much they agreed with the coworker’s hairstyle across the study conditions ($F(1, 221) = 2.31, p = .13, \eta^2_p = 0.01$).

### 8. Study 2 Discussion

We found partial support for our hypotheses in this study. First, Black men and women perceived the non-codeswitching coworker as more professional than White men (Study 2a) and White women (Study 2b), supporting Hypothesis 1. However, in both studies, Black and White participants perceived that codeswitching was more professional than not codeswitching. These findings indicate that perceptions of professionalism differ between White and Black Americans when Black employees do not codeswitch, but both groups agree that racial codeswitching at work is perceived as more professional overall.

We presume that intragroup preferences for Black people to express prototypically Black cultural traits and features explains Black participants’ positive evaluations of the non-codeswitching coworker (Axt et al., 2018). The reverse was true for the White observers in our study. In line with other research, White participants disparaged expression of prototypically Black traits and affirmed codeswitching behaviors that fit the norms and standards of White people (Cross Jr et al., 2002; Cross & Strauss, 1998; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Notably, we find that Black participants are less likely to penalize intragroup members for refusing to codeswitch in the workplace, but both Black and White participants
perceive a Black coworker who engages in racial codeswitching as more professional. This latter finding reinforces beliefs that professionalism is associated with White cultural norms (Gray, 2019; Jones & Okun, 2001) and that changing one’s behavior to match these norms would convey professionalism.

We found partial support for Hypothesis 2. Black and White men did not differ in their evaluations of hair, likely because hairstyling and grooming are more significant for evaluations of women compared to men (Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011). However, our manipulation yielded significant racial differences in terms of participants’ agreement with the character’s hairstyle choices between Black and White women (Study 2b). Black women participants expressed more agreement with the natural hairstyle choice (i.e., non-codeswitching condition) and White women expressed more agreement with the straightened hairstyle choice (i.e., codeswitching condition). The cultural significance of natural hairstyles for Black people in general, and Black women’s self-presentation in particular (Rosette & Dumas, 2007), possibly generated a positive evaluation for Black women participants. In contrast, White women are likely to perceive their Eurocentric hairstyle as normative and rely on negative stereotypes associated with natural hairstyles (e.g., incompetence) to inform their evaluations of hair choice (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Koval & Rosette, 2021; Opie & Phillips, 2015).

Contrary to our hypotheses, participants responded similarly to some racial codeswitching behaviors in Study 2a and 2b. Black and White participants more strongly agreed that individuals should codeswitch when it pertains to style of speech, suggesting that standard American English is likely regarded as expected behavior for all employees in the workplace (Grogger, 2011; Kushins, 2014). On the other hand, Black and White participants did not agree that the hypothetical coworker should codeswitch when it pertains to their preferred name. This was surprising given the inherent racial biases directed towards ‘Black’ sounding names in organizational contexts (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Gaddis, 2015). Collectively, our findings indicate that specific markers of cultural identity may result in greater variation in perceptions of racial codeswitching compared to other behaviors based on the race of the observer.

9. General discussion

Our series of experiments test the perceptions of racial codeswitching as an impression management strategy for Black people to navigate professional work environments. Adjusting one’s self-presentation to fit the norms, experiences, and attributes of the dominant group at work may help to foster similarity and positive evaluations from others, including being seen as a professional. Yet, engaging in this behavior could produce social and psychological costs to individuals. We examined how evaluations of racial codeswitching would vary based on the race of the observer, and determined whether specific codeswitching behaviors generate differing outcomes for individuals. Our between-subject design allowed us to capture impressions of whether racial codeswitching bolstered perceptions of professionalism for Black employees. Together, we found that racial codeswitching behaviors were deemed as more professional from both Black and White observers across our two studies. There were nuances across racial groups in regards to specific forms of racial codeswitching (hairstyle, speech, name). Our results broaden current understanding of race-based impression management and self-presentation strategies.

9.1. Theoretical implications

Our paper investigates racial codeswitching as an impression management strategy for members of a marginalized social identity group. Codeswitching involves the adjustment of external behaviors and knowledge of “appropriate” behaviors in the immediate context that would elicit the desirable outcome. Perceptions of Black people are generally negative in workplaces (Wingfield, 2007), making racial codeswitching a necessary strategy for them to receive job opportunities and advance in professional spaces. We manipulated three ways that Black people might codeswitch at work (e.g., hairstyle, style of speech, name), yet there might be other ways they would seek to manage impressions. For example, it is possible for Black employees to signal their professionalism by not only adjusting how they speak, but what they say (i.e., insider ‘jargon’; Pratt et al., 2006). Additionally, Black employees could not only adjust their physical appearance, but also what they display at work (e.g., diploma) to enhance their credibility (Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Engaging in racial codeswitching further implies that Black people are aware of behaviors and norms that are valued in the traditional American workplace. Expanding our study of this behavioral phenomenon deepens our understanding of how members of marginalized groups navigate social contexts.

Although previous studies have documented codeswitching among Black people (Cros Jr. et al., 2017; Dickens & Chavez, 2017; Hewlin, 2009; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), little scholarship has measured how it is evaluated by others. Studies of impression management in general have insufficiently captured external evaluations of behaviors despite the intended goal of managing others’ perceptions (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Our study captures how racial codeswitching is perceived by others when they are made aware that Black people are intentionally “switching” their behaviors. Disclosing that the fictitious Black coworker was (not) codeswitching was necessary to capture how awareness of this behavior would elicit different reactions as individuals may not be privy to their intra-cognitive process. It is plausible that perceptions of racial codeswitching may differ if observers are aware that the focal person is intentionally adjusting their behavior. Future studies of racial codeswitching may elucidate whether individuals disclose this information to others and what, if any, effect that has on their perceptions.

Of significance to our study is the presumption that professionalism is “coded” by norms and values associated with Whiteness (Ray, 2019; Wingfield, 2007, 2010). White cultural norms, behaviors, and values permeate the business sector (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2020; Ray, 2019; Wingfield, 2010) and are often in opposition to Black cultural norms, values, and behaviors (Gray, 2019; Jones & Okun, 2001). Although research has demonstrated that physical features and traits associated with Whiteness are deemed professional, organizations continue to impose these expectations for all workers despite their inability to embody White characteristics (Koval & Rosette, 2021; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Rosette et al., 2008). Black people tend to recognize when a member of their group is “acting White” (Durkee & Williams, 2015), but empirical studies have not demonstrated whether White people recognize how their cultural norms influence professionalism. Our findings provide some evidence that White observers make implicit associations of professionalism with White cultural norms in workplaces.

The overrepresentation of White leaders in organizations grants them authority to define workplace norms and etiquette, including standards for professionalism, which helps to explain the similar reactions to codeswitching. Overall, both Black and White participants perceived codeswitching as more professional than not codeswitching in the workplace, yet they may not have the same reasons behind their perspective. Black people, who have been socialized in a society dominated by White cultural norms, may know that sounding like a White person will confer positive reactions from others in the workplace. White people, who are less likely to interact with and learn about Black cultural norms, may negatively evaluate behaviors that do not reflect their own experiences. Continuing to study how racial codeswitching is perceived across racial groups may further inform the relationship between this impression management strategy and professionalism.

We took a first step in unpacking how observers may vary in their evaluation of specific codeswitching behaviors in Study 2. Unlike Opie and Phillips‘ (2015) study, we found that Black women participants positively reacted to the fictitious Black woman coworker that chose to
wear her natural hair compared to White women participants, and agreed more strongly with the natural hair choice compared to the straightened style. This is notable given that previous studies demonstrate a natural hair bias either directly from Black participants (Opie & Phillips, 2015) or as a general outcome when collapsing across racial groups (e.g., Koval & Rosette, 2021). White women’s preferences for the straightened hairstyle (i.e., codeswitching condition) may stem from their subconscious endorsement of Eurocentric beauty standards, especially because these standards are easily attainable for them (Ram- atti-Ziber, Shnabel, & Glick, 2020) given that they are considered the prototypical woman in workplace settings (Purdie-Vaughns & Elbach, 2008). This is also the first study to our knowledge that examined hairstyle preferences for Black men. Although Black men may also encounter biases for wearing natural hair, a majority of these perception-based studies have used Black women as the exemplar of this bias (Koval & Rosette, 2021). Our findings indicated that Black and White men similarly agree with Black men wearing their hair clean-shaven with a low cut (i.e., codeswitching condition) compared to a natural hairstyle such as locs or braids. Given the lack of research in this area, we can only assume that grooming standards for men are possibly more standardized and, therefore, do not produce differing evaluations by race.

Evaluations of speech and name preferences were more nuanced than we anticipated. One the one hand, it was unsurprising that both Black and White participants agreed with linguistic codeswitching in the workplace given that AAVE is highly stigmatized and perceived as inferior to standard American English (Britt & Weldon, 2015; Rickford et al., 2015). Black Americans are taught at an early age to suppress AAVE in educational and workplace contexts in order to obtain quality education and employment opportunities (Brown et al., 2015; Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Washington, Patton Terry, & Seidenberg, 2013). Thus, their agreement to adjust style of speech in the workplace fits literature on racial socialization and preparation for navigating interracial contexts (Cross Jr. et al., 2017). On the other hand, we were surprised that Black and White participants believed that it was unnecessary for Black people to intentionally change their name at work. A large body of research indicates that Black-sounding names activate biases when evaluating individuals in work-related contexts (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Gaddis, 2015; Kang et al., 2016; Milkman et al., 2012). Yet, a majority of these studies occur at certain stages of one’s career (e.g., job interview). Our findings might capture slightly different evaluations of someone who is already working in a professional environment. Ultimately, capturing how racial codeswitching is evaluated across different domains and racial groups demonstrates the complexities of this phenomenon.

9.2. Practical implications

Our study demonstrates one of many dilemmas that Black employees face in their everyday work experiences: whether codeswitching or not will elicit perceptions of professionalism. Although all employees may behave more professionally at work compared to more casual settings, individuals from stigmatized racial groups may feel a disproportionate pressure to conceal significant cultural aspects of themselves to minimize stereotyping ascribed to their social identities. Our findings suggest that racial codeswitching is a necessary behavior for Black employees to be perceived as professionals. Engaging racial codeswitching might limit how Black people are “allowed” to behave at work if they desire to maintain these perceptions. Further, it places a burden on Black employees to chronically monitor their appearance, speech, and behaviors while at work, possibly contributing to burnout and fatigue (McCluney et al., 2019). Deciding to codeswitch or not codeswitch will require Black employees to carefully weigh the costs of this impression management strategy.

Examining others’ perceptions of this strategy provides valuable insight for Black employees who may consider codeswitching at work. Because a majority of professionals in the United States are White, Black people may consider codeswitching to be perceived as a professional in these contexts. Interestingly, we also found that Black perceivers evaluated racial codeswitching differently from White perceivers in Study 2, suggesting that the social context and targeted audience influences what behaviors are considered professional. This variation in perception suggests that “professionalism” is a malleable construct, which offers the opportunity for organizations and individuals to actively shape its meaning by changing standards for hairstyles, speech, and names. Our findings demonstrate the significance of policies that prohibit discrimination against Black cultural norms given that the same behaviors are evaluated differently based on racial group membership.

Organizations in particular would benefit from critically examining how their social environment and promotion process may reward codeswitching behaviors. The oft-touted claim that companies want employees to “bring their whole selves to work” may penalize Black employees who do not fit into the culture. In light of our research, we recommend that companies expand or redefine what constitutes professionalism so that it encompasses a range of cultural norms, behaviors, and values. Similarly, employees who wish to build authentic relationships with their Black colleagues may need to turn inward and examine if they deem behaviors not aligned with White norms to be unprofessional. As perceivers are not always privy to the fact that their Black colleagues may be codeswitching, they may unintentionally reward White cultural norms as they may be more likely to be seen as points of connection and similarity. Equipping all employees with the capacity to constructively engage with difference may help alleviate the pressure on Black employees to navigate others’ perceptions via racial codeswitching.

9.3. Strengths, limitations, and future directions

A strength of the present study is that we manipulated racial codeswitching behaviors using two forms of priming that are relevant to workplace contexts (i.e., voicemails and emails). Although we did not replicate our results across the two studies, we do find that these stimuli allow us to understand the phenomenon more precisely from a methodological approach. Our distinct priming materials may have encouraged participants to focus on different pieces of information. The audio stimuli used in Study 1 may have led participants to focus more heavily on the dialect and tone of voice in the voicemail recordings, potentially offering participants more contextual information about the hypothetical Black coworker than the email stimuli used in Study 2. This additional information may have interfered with and provided a greater distraction from the other codeswitching behaviors described in the voicemail recordings. In contrast, the email stimuli in Study 2 allowed participants to focus more specifically on the codeswitching behaviors and draw their own inferences about the hypothetical Black coworker with minimal contextual information. For both studies, our manipulation did not include specific characteristics of the company (e.g., racial composition), which allowed participants’ implicit theories to inform their perceptions of the coworker’s professionalism more closely.

Despite the strengths of our stimuli, they also presented some limitations. It is possible that the priming materials may have led participants to draw different interpretations of racial codeswitching, even when identical information is presented. Future studies could use one stimulus that clearly depicts differences in behavior such as photos or videos to standardize participants’ interpretations of racial codeswitching. Using other data collection techniques that provide external validation of racial codeswitching in an actual workplace may also improve and broaden our assessments of the construct. Moreover, the explicit nature in which racial codeswitching was described in our priming materials may not accurately portray the manner in which racial codeswitching would be discussed in an actual work environment. Deciding to codeswitch is an intra-cognitive process, which reduces the likelihood that observers would be privy to this information. Future
studies may wish to incorporate more subtle means of priming for racial codeswitching in study materials to enhance external validity.

We further contribute to scholarship that has examined impression management through a racial lens. Our conceptualization of codeswitching stems from experiences of Black people as they attempt to navigate social contexts where negative stereotypes targeting their racial group are pervasive (Wingfield, 2007). Considering that the bulk of experimental studies evaluating Black people tend to have mostly White participants driving the effects, we incorporate Black people’s perspective in our study design. Our comparison between Black and White participants illustrates points of convergence and divergence among the various components of racial codeswitching, offering a broader understanding of this impression management strategy.

At the same time, our focus on Black people does not account for the experiences of other minoritized groups. All people of color are likely to experience pressure to assimilate when navigating the White-constructed norms of the workplace, but their interaction with professionalism may differ based on the cultural norms and stereotypes associated with different groups. Future studies could investigate how people of color from other racial groups navigate professionalism norms through codeswitching or other impression management strategies.

Further, limiting our focus to race does not account for Black people’s intersecting identities that are also stigmatized in the workplace. Evaluators might not perceive a Black lesbian woman as professional if they engage in racial codeswitching because they are still “violating” expectations that employees are heterosexual (Bowleg, Brooks, & Ritz, 2008) and perceptions of Black gay men who codeswitch may elicit different reactions given that this group is viewed as more “White” than “Black” (Pettsko & Bodenhausen, 2019). Our manipulation of specific behaviors also entails social and physical features of Blackness (e.g., natural hair). Thus, it is possible that some racial codeswitching strategies would be perceived differently for Black-White Biracial or multiracial people, particularly those who are perceived as less Black (Smith II & Wout, 2019). It is therefore unclear how racial codeswitching would enhance or detract from these perceptions. Exploring the intersection of race and other dimensions of identity (e.g., sexual orientation) are important considerations for future research to capture the holistic experiences of Black people who codeswitch.

Including White people’s perceptions of racial codeswitching was important to understand how this behavior may be evaluated by intergroup members. Yet, our design may have missed important elements. It would be wise for scholars to consider additional factors that influence perceptions in follow-up studies of racial codeswitching such as White participants’ prior exposure to Black coworkers, whether evaluations of racial codeswitching vary in different interactions (e.g., hiring scenario), and their endorsement of particular stereotypes affecting Black people at work (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2013). Our gender-match approach also prohibited us from capturing how White women might perceive a Black man who does (not) codeswitch or a White man evaluating a Black woman. Both situations are highly likely in real work settings as White women are overrepresented in human resources roles (Namely, 2016) and White men are overrepresented in senior level positions in professional spaces (Li, Huang, Sesahgiri, Park, & Griggs, 2020) placing them in positions to hire and promote Black women and men. We presume that some of the outcomes may be similar given that White men are less likely to interact with Black women in professional settings given occupational segregation and systemic barriers that prohibit them from acquiring organizational leadership (Leahin, 2020), and White women may primarily interact with Black women through their HR roles, making their reliance on stereotypes to create judgments plausible. Future studies might consider how to measure racial codeswitching without matching participants based on gender.

10. Conclusion

Our research highlights how perceptions affect the “effectiveness” of a race-based impression management strategy. We found that Black and White participants differently evaluate whether racial codeswitching enhances perceptions of professionalism for Black employees. Furthermore, identifying specific ways that Black people may engage in racial codeswitch nuanced our results based on the observers’ race. As Black employees and members of other marginalized groups seek to advance in organizations, it is important to recognize the dilemmas they encounter while managing others’ impressions of their behaviors.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104199.

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