

A Safe Town? Ostensible State or County Racial Climate Impacts Perceptions of Town-Level Racial Identity-Safety Cues

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Abstract

Identity-safety cues (ISCs) are environmental signals that indicate one's marginalized identity is valued. ISC contextual information may impact town evaluations. Over three experiments ($N = 1,107$), we examine how single or multiple ISCs posted across storefronts (i.e., Black lives matter flag, Study 1–3) and the racial climate surrounding a hypothetical town (Study 2–3) impact attributions of ISC motives and town evaluations. Racial minorities and Black Americans perceived greater external diversity motives (e.g., social pressure) of a storefront with an ISC when all other storefronts had an ISC compared to when no other storefronts had an ISC (Study 1–3). Ostensible state- and county-level racially egalitarian climates elicited greater expectations of internal diversity motives and positive town evaluations (e.g., greater progressive policies, quality of life, Black residents) compared to prejudicial racial climates and towns with a single ISC (Study 2–3). Findings demonstrate the need to consider multiple levels of ISCs.

Keywords

identity-safety cues, perceived social norms, normative safety cues

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Introduction

Identity-safety cues (ISCs) are environmental and interpersonal features that communicate a marginalized identity is welcomed and valued (e.g., Kruk & Matsick, 2021; Murphy et al., 2007). In contrast, identity-threat cues (ITCs) are environmental and interpersonal features that communicate a marginalized identity is *not* valued (e.g., Murphy et al., 2007; Steele et al., 2002). Multiple types of ISCs or ITCs may co-exist *within* a single level of context. For example, a single environment may vary in its diversity programming and policies (Derricks et al., 2025; Moser et al., 2025), inclusive environmental features (Murphy et al., 2007; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2026), and (lack of) minority representation (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Wilton et al., 2020). Yet, identity-based cues also exist at multiple levels of one's environment. The surrounding racial climate of a single environment (i.e., ostensible aggregate attitudes toward one's marginalized identity at a county- or state-level, Payne & Hannay, 2021; Pham & Chaney, 2026) may function as a higher-level ITC or ISC that broadly encompasses a local-level context. Here, we investigate how ostensible knowledge of such higher-level identity-relevant information impacts lower, local-level evaluations of a town where storefronts implement ISCs. For

instance, local-level towns may adopt certain ISCs that counter or align with higher-level ISCs or ITCs. Thus, this research novelly examines how various levels of ISCs, both internal and external to one's immediate context, may interact when forming evaluations of one's environment.

Critically, higher-level climate ISCs may influence appraisals of local-level ISCs. If one is aware that the majority of state or county residents harbor egalitarian or prejudicial Black attitudes, how does this higher-level racial climate knowledge influence evaluations of local-level ISCs, like the Black lives matter (BLM) flag (Derricks et al., 2023), adopted across a prospective neighborhood? We expand upon ISC and racialized space research by experimentally manipulating two levels of identity-relevant information simultaneously in a fictitious town space: higher-level racial climate (ISC or ITC) and local-level BLM flags (ISCs). See Figure 1 for visualization of two levels of cue manipulations

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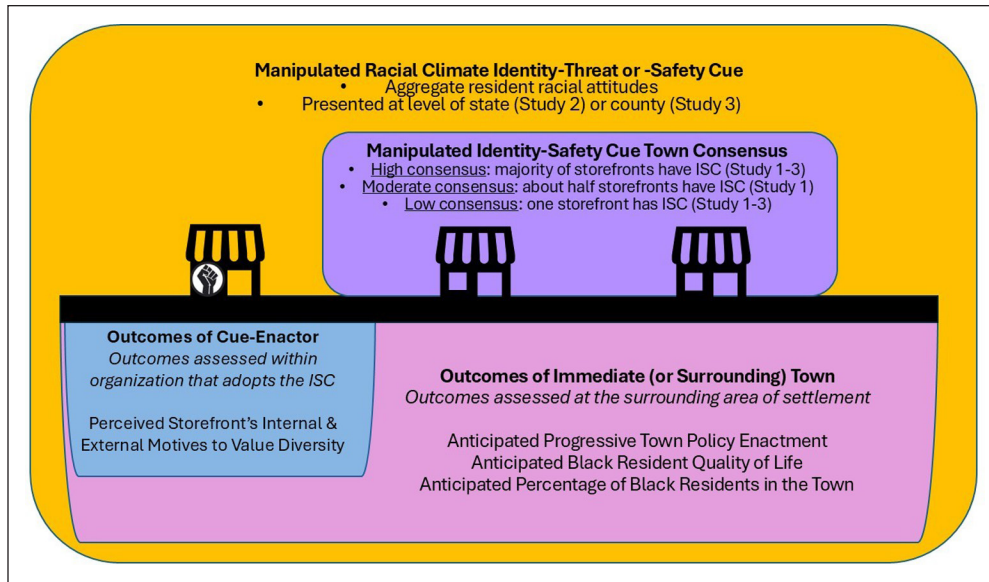


Figure 1. Outcomes and Experimental Manipulation of Higher-Level Climate and Town-Level Identity-Cues.

Note. Identity-based cues were manipulated on two levels: at the higher level of climate and local level of physical town. Racial climate, manipulated at the level of the state or county, indicates identity-threatening and identity-safe (Study 2–3), or absent information (Study 3) via aggregate resident attitude information. The consensus of ISCs within a town was manipulated as high or low consensus (Study 1–3), or moderate consensus (Study 1). Outcomes were assessed on two levels: the target storefront cue-enactor (i.e., perceptions of diversity motives from the storefront that always adopted a BLM flag in varied consensus conditions) and at the town (i.e., anticipated town policies, quality of life, and resident racial makeup). ISC = identity-safety cue; BLM = Black lives matter.

(higher-level racial climate and local-level town ISCs) and the two corresponding levels of outcome variables.

Additionally, we consider environmental imagery ISCs beyond the mere presence or absence of an ISC, as prior literature does (e.g., Chaney et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2021; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2026), but rather examine how widespread, or high and low in *consensus* (e.g., normative, Chaney et al., 2026; Moser & Wiley, 2025; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025) the ISC is across storefronts in the town. Finally, as structural and spatial stigma segregates and racializes physical towns and spaces (e.g., Bonam et al., 2017; Keene & Padilla, 2014; Williams & Collins, 2001), this research investigates town-level evaluations from varied levels of identity-based cues in a novel, commercial setting of a public town space. We propose that high consensus ISCs may signal more favorable diversity motives and positive town-level evaluations (i.e., greater quality of life, progressive town policies, representation of Black residents) in prejudicial racial climates, as such ISCs counter discriminatory expectations of the higher-level environment, compared to purportedly egalitarian racial climates, where ISCs may be perceived as low-cost allyship.

Perceived Racial Climate as Identity-Safe or Identity-Threatening Information

As structural stigma¹ produces racial segregation, spaces become racialized (Bonam et al., 2017), thus warranting our investigation of racial identity-cues (i.e., racial climate and

BLM flags) in public town spaces. Structural stigma is grounded in legislative power, such as housing and banking systems, which determine the migration, mobility, coping resources, and health of Black people in the United States (Graham et al., 2016; Keene & Padilla, 2014; Williams & Collins, 2001). Aggregate attitudes toward a racially marginalized group, often examined as racial climate, are produced from structural stigma (e.g., Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Payne & Hannay, 2021). For example, the Great Migration of Black residents from Southern to Northern and Western states is associated with current regional pro-White implicit bias in Northern and Western States (Vuletic et al., 2024). Further, higher aggregate racial implicit bias scores on college campuses are associated with fewer Black faculty and greater confederate monuments (Vuletic & Payne, 2019).

We contend that racial attitudes in the aggregate, such as state residents' implicit or explicit attitudes, are identity-relevant information that can serve as a higher-level ITC or ISC. For example, prejudicial racial attitudes in the aggregate, such as Eurocentric hairstyle policies, serve as an ITC in an organization while aggregate inclusive racial attitudes (e.g., equitable hair and pay policies) convey an egalitarian racial climate, thus operating as an ISC (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026; Samuel & Leigh, 2025). Thus, the present research examines higher-level identity-relevant cues in the form of aggregate state or county racial attitudes, and how (mis)alignment with local-level ISCs may impact town evaluations.

While expectations of identity-safety are often indexed by personal expectations of belonging, trust, fairness, and authenticity in one's environment (e.g., Derricks et al., 2025; Johnson et al., 2021; Pietri et al., 2025; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), here, we consider *space-focused judgments* (Bonam et al., 2016, 2018) at the level of a hypothetical town. Space-focused judgments examine the consequences of racialized spaces in the United States via expectations of neighborhood resources and demographics. In assessing town evaluations, we examine policy protections (e.g., Hatzenbuehler, 2016), perceptions of collective wellbeing (e.g., Leigh & Melwani, 2019, 2022), and neighborhood demographics (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016). Expectations of progressive town policies, especially policies that counter regressive movements against marginalized groups (e.g., racial minorities, transgender people, women, Clark, 2023; Planas, 2023; Schwarz, 2023), indicate belief in small-scale protections within the physical town space. Further, expectations of Black residents' quality of life may serve as a corresponding indicator of wellbeing (e.g., social adjustment of community members, Camfield & Skevington, 2008; Raphael et al., 1996) by those impacted by ISCs and ITCs. Finally, by assessing expectations of Black resident percentage, we assess a critical component of town evaluations – who inhabits such spaces (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016, 2017). We anticipate higher-level climate cues, including their (mis)alignment with local-level ISCs, will impact these town-level evaluations.

Of note, while our outcomes function as markers of space-focused judgments (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016), we contend that space-focused judgments may function as downstream consequences of anticipated identity-safety or -threat. Identity-threat elicits expectations of poor identity-based treatment, such as being the subject of stereotyping or exclusion (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016; Steele et al., 2002), in turn, prompting coping responses that determine one's health and wellbeing (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Assessments of Black residents' quality of life encapsulates global wellbeing expectations of racially marginalized groups who reside in a town with higher-level ITC or ISC cues. Identity-safety, on the other hand, is often captured through expectations of equitable organizational policies for marginalized individuals (i.e., procedural fairness, Chaney et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2021; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025). Our measure of anticipated progressive town policies functions as a global measure of procedural fairness for marginalized residents of the hypothetical town. Finally, high minority representation is a key outcome of identity-safety, where high representation of one's ingroup facilitates greater belonging and organizational attraction (e.g., Kroeper et al., 2022; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Wilton et al., 2020). Thus, assessing expectations of the percentage of Black residents in the town is capturing downstream identity-safety or -threat. Our focus on space-focused judgments of the town in response to racial climate cues and local-town level ISCs taps into downstream, global measures of collective identity-safety or -threat.

Diversity Attributions and Town Evaluations From Multiple Levels of Identity-Relevant Cues

While ISCs may exist at different levels (e.g., state-level and town-level), ISCs within a level may also vary in their consensus. That is, a town may have several storefronts (high consensus) or only one (low consensus) storefront adopting an ISC. Attribution theory and prior ISC research may guide how racial minorities form space-focused judgments (town evaluations) of towns with varied ISC consensus. High consensus of ISCs, such as all organizations having a diversity statement or all employees at an organization engaging in pronoun-sharing, can impact anticipated identity-safety by shifting perceived internal and external motives behind ISC adoption (Chaney et al., 2026; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025). Specifically, high ISC consensus may impede attributions of internal diversity motives (e.g., driven from personal values of inclusivity) for the people adopting an ISC while facilitating evaluations of external diversity motives (e.g., adhering to a social norm, Derricks et al., 2025; Thai & Nylund, 2024). Belief that ISC adoption motives are not genuine (Chaney et al., 2026; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025) likely emerge due to awareness that organizations and people, at times, face pressure to hold certain diversity stances that maximize profit and sustain a favorable social reputation (e.g., “strategy-driven motives,” White & Carter, 2026). Belief that organizations engage in diversity practices when it best serves them (e.g., Associated Press, 2025; Dennison, 2025) may fuel perceptions of greater external and lower internal diversity motives in high compared to low consensus ISCs contexts (Kelley, 1967, 1973; Moser & Wiley, 2025). While past research examined how ISC consensus impacts perceived motives for personnel and organizations adopting ISCs, similar effects are likely to emerge in a town context where ISC consensus is manipulated across storefronts.

We contend that perceived diversity attributions of storefronts with local-level consensus of ISCs will differ depending on whether the ISCs (mis)align with broader racial climate cues. Our predictions embody Kelley's (1973) augmentation principle, where costly diversity actions in organizations are attributed to more genuine motives, promoting identity-safety (Chaney & Pereira-Jorge, 2026; Ponce de Leon et al., 2024; Thai et al., 2024). Thus, local-level high consensus ISCs in prejudicial climates may signal much needed racial inclusivity as they deviate from the prejudicial norms of the broader environment (e.g., displaying a Pride flag in a state with low LGBTQ+ protections, Barnes-Gilbert & Prock, 2025). Thus, high ISC consensus towns in prejudicial climates (vs. egalitarian climates) may be perceived as incurring more social costs and backlash from consumers or profit margins, which may contribute to greater perceptions of the storefront's internal diversity motives and lower perceptions of external diversity motives (e.g., Moser & Wiley, 2025; Thai & Nylund, 2024). Put differently, high consensus ISCs may signal a strong town-level egalitarian climate,

which may attenuate the identity-threat elicited from salient prejudicial state- or county- climate cue, eliciting positive town evaluations.

Research examining perceptions of co-occurring ISCs and ITCs (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026; Pietri et al., 2025; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008) at the same level of an environment offers some insights into how perceivers may determine space-focused judgments in our hypothetical town. When an ISC (i.e., anti-racism taskforce) is situated in an organization with a prejudicial racial climate (i.e., an ITC, low aggregate employee support for racially-inclusive policies), compared to pro-Black or control climates, Black people anticipated the task-force to be less effective at cultivating identity-safety for Black workers (Pham & Chaney, 2026). Conversely, a pro-Black climate facilitated positive evaluations of the organization and the ISC (Pham & Chaney, 2026). Despite examining ISCs and ITCs at the same level, this research suggests that ITCs may “override” the effect of singular (i.e., low consensus) ISCs and shape negative organization evaluations (e.g., Pietri et al., 2025). We contend such effects are likely to emerge even when the racial climate manipulation is higher-level (e.g., residents’ attitudes of the state) compared to the same level of the storefronts adopting the ISC (e.g., attitudes of storefront employees or customers). Thus, in a low ISC consensus town, a higher-level prejudicial racial climate cue may mitigate the positive town-level evaluations that a single ISC traditionally elicits under egalitarian or neutral climate cues. In contrast, high ISC consensus towns (vs. low ISC consensus towns) adopting environmental ISCs in egalitarian racial climates (high-level ISC) may signal performative or self-enhancing allyship motives (Grabin & Goldie, 2025; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Such effects may emerge because the local-level ISC may be perceived as in line with the broader environment (higher-level ISC) and thus adhering to a normative, low-effort allyship behavior (e.g., Chaney et al., 2026; Grabin & Goldie, 2025; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025).

Current Research

The present research examines how experimental local-level ISC consensus information and ostensible higher-level (state, county) racial climate cues impact (a) perceived diversity motives of a storefront with an ISC and (b) town-level evaluations consistent with space-focused judgments. We examine ISCs among storefronts, a novel area of examination (i.e., traditional ISC environments include academic, organizational, or healthcare settings, Cipollina & Sanchez, 2019; Johnson & Pietri, 2024; Murphy et al., 2007). Study 1 examines how ISC consensus (i.e., a single storefront, half the storefronts, or all the storefronts have a BLM flag) impacts perceived diversity motives and town-level evaluations among racial minorities. Research suggests that ISCs may signal the most identity-safety when tailored to individuals’ specific racial and gender identities (i.e., Johnson & Pietri, 2024; Pietri et al., 2018).

However, racial minorities may generally expect positive town evaluations from an ISC signaling support of one racial group, compared to the absence of any ISCs (e.g., Chaney et al., 2016). Thus, we examine perceptions of high or low BLM ISC consensus towns among racial minorities (Study 1) and Black Americans (Study 2–3).

Study 2 introduced a state racial climate cue via explicit racial attitudes (via survey polling) of a high or low ISC consensus town. Study 3 narrowed the scope of racial climate to the level of the county using ostensible aggregate implicit association test (IAT) data to assess the impact of prejudicial, egalitarian, or absent (i.e., control) attitudes. We focused on explicit and implicit racial attitudes to convey racial climate, given how such attitude research is generated in news outlets and mass media within the United States (e.g., Pew Research Center, Gallup). Our racial climate manipulation introduces a higher-level backdrop of an ISC, ITC, or neutral identity-relevant information.

We first note the hypothesized general trends, or main effects, of perceived diversity motives and expected town evaluations. Town evaluations (i.e., anticipated Black residents’ quality of life, progressive town policies) and perceived external diversity motives were expected to be lower in prejudicial racial climates compared to egalitarian or no information climates. Similarly, we expected high ISC consensus towns where all storefronts adopted the BLM flag would elicit positive town evaluations and less favorable diversity motives (i.e., fewer internal, greater external) attributed to an ISC storefront than low ISC consensus towns where a single storefront has a BLM flag.

Our interactive hypotheses were primarily driven by the incongruent effect of prejudicial or egalitarian climates in high ISC consensus towns. We proposed high ISC consensus towns would elicit more positive storefront diversity attributions (i.e., greater internal and lower external motives) and town evaluations when the broader racial climate was prejudicial compared to egalitarian. We further hypothesized that diversity attributions and town-level evaluations would not significantly differ in prejudicial racial climates between high and low ISC consensus towns because the town-level ISCs may not “outweigh” the identity-threatening information that the climate poses at a larger scale beyond the town (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026; Pietri et al., 2025). Yet, we contend that in egalitarian racial climates, high ISC consensus towns compared to low ISC consensus towns should elicit more disingenuous storefront diversity attributions (i.e., lower internal and greater external motives), though the broader egalitarian environment and high number of ISCs would elicit positive town evaluations.

Finally, we hypothesized that attributions of diversity motives would not differ between racial climate conditions in low ISC consensus towns. However, we expected less positive town-level evaluations in low ISC consensus towns when there was a higher-level prejudicial, rather than egalitarian, racial climate because prejudicial racial climates function as an ITC (Pham & Chaney, 2026).

Table 1. Demographic Summary.

Participant identity	Study 1, <i>n</i> (%)	Study 2, <i>n</i> (%)	Study 3, <i>n</i> (%)
Gender			
Women (cisgender and transgender)	121 (45.7)	164 (48.0)	300 (60.6)
Men (cisgender and transgender)	108 (40.8)	152 (44.4)	173 (34.9)
Non-binary/genderqueer	6 (2.3)	7 (2.0)	8 (1.6)
Transgender identifying	1 (0.4)	25 (7.3)	10 (2.0)
Questioning/don't know	5 (1.9)	—	3 (0.6)
Self-identified	25 (9.4)	19 (5.6)	11 (2.2)
Race/ethnicity			
Black or African American	41 (15.5)	342 (100.0)	492 (99.4)
American Indian or Alaska Native	3 (1.1)	—	—
East Asian	43 (16.2)	—	—
Southeast Asian	31 (11.7)	—	—
South Asian	67 (25.3)	—	—
Hispanic or Latinx/o/e	32 (12.1)	—	—
Multiracial/more than one race/ethnicity	27 (10.2)	—	3 (0.6)
Self-identified	5 (1.9)	—	—
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Age (years)	19.21 (1.99)	36.51 (12.02)	40.70 (12.82)
Political orientation (1, <i>Strongly conservative</i> –7, <i>Strongly liberal</i>)	4.50 (1.34)	4.16 (2.03)	4.63 (1.75)

Note. *SD* = standard deviation.

Study 3 was pre-registered (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UK2JV>). We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions across studies. Data, materials, and codebook for all studies are available via the Open Science Framework (OSF, https://osf.io/8xjf6/overview?view_only=e9830257822e4aefbaf36328f60a32c8). Artificial intelligence (AI) was not used in the generation, analysis, or writing process of this research.

Study 1

Study 1 examined how ISC consensus across storefronts impacted perceived diversity motives of a single storefront with an ISC and town evaluations. Participants viewed a town where either all, half, or only one storefront(s) displayed a BLM flag. By examining when half of the storefronts engaged in the ISC, we sought to examine how an ambiguous town consensus of ISCs may impact various identity-relevant outcomes. Because we examined racial minority perceptions, rather than just Black Americans, we controlled for participants' warmth toward Black people.

In line with past research (e.g., Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025), we hypothesized that generally, in the low ISC consensus town (i.e., single storefront displays a BLM flag), participants would evaluate the critical storefront as being more internally motivated, and less externally motivated, to value diversity than moderate or high ISC consensus towns (e.g., half or majority display the BLM flag). However, we hypothesized the high ISC consensus town would elicit positive town evaluations (i.e., greater Black quality of life, higher percentages of Black residents, and more enactment of

progressive town policies) than those in low or moderate ISC consensus towns.

Method

Participants. An a priori power analysis for a three-cell design with 95% power to detect a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$) indicated a desired sample of 252 participants. In all, 265 participants were recruited from an introductory Psychology course in exchange for partial course credit at the University of Buffalo, SUNY during the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters.² All participants passed at least two out of three attention checks.³ See Table 1 for sample demographics.

Procedures. After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: All ISC Town, Half ISC Town, and Single ISC Town. Each condition displayed six images of various town buildings. The town images were identical across each condition but varied in the consensus of displaying a BLM flag (ISC). Participants were told this was a randomly selected U.S. town. Images were selected from UnSplash, a royalty-free stock image website (<https://unsplash.com/>).

Those in the *All ISC Town condition* were exposed to a town where all six of the displayed buildings had a BLM flag. Those in the *Half ISC Town condition* evaluated a town where three buildings had a BLM flag. In the *Single ISC Town condition*, only one building had a BLM flag. After viewing all six buildings, participants had to correctly answer how many buildings displayed the BLM flag (scale of 0–6) before proceeding.



Figure 2. Town ISC Consensus Condition Materials.

Note. The critical storefront that always had a BLM flag displayed across conditions is the first righthand image with a bike. In the All ISC Town condition, all stores had a cue; Half ISC Town condition had half the stores with a cue, and the Single ISC Town condition had one store with a cue. ISC = identity-safety cue; BLM = Black lives matter.

Participants then reported on perceived internal and external diversity motives of the storefront that displayed the BLM flag across all conditions (see Figure 2). Then, participants reported on perceptions of the town's progressive social policy endorsement, perceptions of Black quality of life, and percentage of Black residents in the town. Finally, participants indicated their attitude toward Black Americans and were debriefed. Participants completed three attention checks throughout the survey. Additional measures related to perceptions of the critical organization (e.g., perceived social appropriateness of the BLM flag posted at the store), and evaluations of the broader town (e.g., perceived discrimination)⁴ across all studies are reported in the Supplemental Material. All data and materials are available (https://osf.io/8xjfb/overview?view_only=e9830257822e4aefbaf36328f60a32c8).

Measures

Perceived Internal and External Diversity Motives of the Storefront. Eight items (adapted, Chaney et al., 2026) assessed the extent to which participants perceived the target store as valuing diversity from internal motives (three items) and external motives (five items). Sample items include “. . . Because they believe it is morally right to have a diverse workforce” (internal motives, $\alpha = .90$) and “Because of social pressure to value diversity” (external motives, $\alpha = .82$). Items were rated on a 1 to 7 (*Strongly disagree-Strongly agree*) scale.

Anticipated Town Progressive Policy Enactment. Six items were developed by the authors that assessed perceptions that “the people in the town have . . .” engaged in socially progressive practices, such as “Host Black Lives Matter rallies, sit-ins, panels,” “Teach about race, gender, and sexuality in public schools,” and “Have supported diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] in workplace” ($\alpha = .91$). Items were rated on a 7-point (*Not at all likely-Very likely*) scale.

Anticipated Black Quality of Life. Three items assessed the extent to which participants believed Black residents “. . . have a good quality of life in this town,” “Black people have life satisfaction in this town,” and “Black people enjoy living in this town” ($\alpha = .94$). Items were loosely adapted from WHO (1997) life quality scales and rated on a 1 to 7 (*Not at all likely-Very likely*) scale.

Anticipated Percentage of Black Residents. A single item assessed expectations of the percentage of Black residents on a slider from 0 (*Little/None*) to 100 (*A lot/Everyone*). The slider was preset at 50%.

Black Feeling Thermometer. A single slider-scale item assessed participants' self-reported warmth or coldness toward Black people on a 0 (*Very cold/Negative*) to 100 (*Very Warm/Positive*). The slider was preset at 50 ($M = 83.43$, $SD = 19.96$).

Results

A series of ANCOVAs were conducted to assess conditional effects on outcomes while controlling for participants' warmth toward Black people.⁵ Ratings of warmth toward Black people did not significantly differ by condition, $F(2,262) = 1.66$, $p = .192$, $d = 0.23$. See Table 2 for ANCOVA results and descriptives.⁶ Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc tests were conducted to probe significant main effects (Table 3).

Significant main effects emerged for perceived storefront external diversity motives and progressive town policies. Participants inferred greater external diversity motives from the storefront in the All ISC Town compared to the Single ISC Town. Further, participants perceived greater progressive town policies in the All ISC Town and Half ISC Town than the Single ISC Town. No other significant differences emerged.

Table 2. Study 1, ANCOVA Results (Black Warmth as Covariate).

Outcomes	Consensus main effect			Estimated marginal means by condition		
				All ISC town	Half ISC town	Single ISC town
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Store. internal motives	0.68	.506	0.14	5.66 (0.12)	5.68 (0.12)	5.51 (0.12)
Store. external motives	3.28	.039	0.32	5.07 (0.12)	4.75 (0.13)	4.66 (0.13)
Town's progressive policy	9.64	<.001	0.55	5.18 (0.13)	4.91 (0.13)	4.43 (0.12)
Black quality of life	0.44	.646	0.11	4.65 (0.13)	4.50 (0.13)	4.51 (0.12)
% of Black residents	2.83	.061	0.31	52.36 (2.70)	52.92 (2.80)	44.65 (2.48)

Note. $F(2,259)$ for Consensus condition, except percentage of Black residents, $F(2,234)$ due to missing responses. Bolded outcomes indicate statistical significance. ISC = identity-safety cue; SE = standard error.

Table 3. Study 1 LSD Post Hoc Comparisons.

Outcome	Comparisons	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Store. External motives	All vs. Half	0.30	.068	[-0.02, 0.67]
	All vs. Single	0.34	.014	[0.09, 0.75]
	Half vs. Single	0.08	.574	[-0.24, 0.43]
Town's progressive policies	All vs. Half	0.24	.147	[-0.09, 0.63]
	All vs. Single	0.63	<.001	[0.41, 1.10]
	Half vs. Single	0.41	.006	[0.14, 0.83]

Note. All = all ISC town condition; Half = half ISC town condition; Single = single ISC town condition. ISC = identity-safety cue; CI = confidence interval; LSD = Fisher's Least Significance Difference.

Discussion

In Study 1, ISC consensus influenced racial minorities' expectations of the storefront's external diversity motives and expectations of the town's egalitarian policies. In line with past research (Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025), high ISC consensus elicited greater perceived external diversity motives, but also greater expectations of progressive town policies, compared to low ISC consensus. The ambiguous ISC condition resulted in minimal differences, indicating the strength of the consensus matters in shaping perceived motives and identity-safety (Chaney et al., 2026).

Other outcomes of Black residents' quality of life, percentage of Black residents, and internal diversity motives were relatively moderate-high across ISC town consensus conditions, suggesting that some baseline of positive town evaluations may be elicited regardless of consensus information. Notably, despite the varied ISC consensus, estimates of Black resident percentage were not significantly impacted as might have been expected based on research on racialized spaces (e.g., Bonam et al., 2017), though Black population estimates were high across conditions. Finally, Study 1 did not recruit just Black Americans, and thus null effects of Black-specific town evaluation outcomes may be due to the potential limited transfer of ISCs for those whom the cue does not target (e.g., Johnson & Pietri, 2024). Nevertheless, having demonstrated initial evidence for ISCs at the town

level, we sought to include information about state racial attitudes in Study 2 to test our full hypotheses.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to examine high or low town ISC consensus (i.e., dropping the ambiguous condition) with a sample of Black Americans. Novel to ISC research, we directly manipulated a higher-level identity-relevant cue: racial climate. We introduced state racial climate by disclosing explicit survey poll results of attitudes toward racial equality and the BLM movement among residents of the state the town supposedly resided in.

We hypothesized that differences in perceptions of storefront diversity motives and town-level outcomes would be strongest between prejudicial and egalitarian racial climates in towns with high ISC consensus. Specifically, we hypothesized that high ISC consensus towns in prejudicial racial climates would signal costly allyship engagement that counters state norms (e.g., Thai & Nylund, 2024) compared to egalitarian racial climates, eliciting favorable diversity attributions (i.e., greater perceived internal, lower external motives) and positive town outcomes. We also hypothesized that in an egalitarian racial climate, a storefront in a high ISC consensus town, compared to a low ISC consensus town, would be perceived as having greater external diversity motives and fewer internal diversity motives, while eliciting

Prejudice Climate State News	Egalitarian Climate State News
Recent report finds 20% of residents support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement	Recent report finds 87% of residents support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement
A new state report conducted in March 2025 by a survey research agency found that 20% of state residents support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The poll asked about agreement or disagreement with statements like, "I support racial equality among Black and White Americans" and "Black Americans still face prejudice and discrimination in this country," among items specific to BLM support (i.e., "I support BLM rallies, protests, and events to raise awareness of discrimination and create support for racial equality"). When asking residents about this finding, most agreed with the results.	A new state report conducted in March 2025 by a survey research agency found that 87% of state residents support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The poll asked about agreement or disagreement with statements like, "I support racial equality among Black and White Americans" and "Black Americans still face prejudice and discrimination in this country," among items specific to BLM support (i.e., "I support BLM rallies, protests, and events to raise awareness of discrimination and create support for racial equality"). When asking residents about this finding, most agreed with the results.
An interview with Dr. Desmond, a researcher who examines social issues and racial attitudes, spoke about these findings. Dr. Desmond states, "The residents have had low support of racial equality over the years. Various towns have held BLM protests, but many were met with police escalation and arrests. To say 20% of the residents support BLM is not surprising in the slightest."	An interview with Dr. Desmond, a researcher who examines social issues and racial attitudes, spoke about these findings. Dr. Desmond states, "The residents have been supportive of racial equality over the years. Various towns have held BLM protests, of which were safe without police escalation. To say 87% of the residents support BLM is not surprising in the slightest."

Figure 3. Study 2 State Climate Manipulation (Higher-Level Identity-Cue).

Note. Those randomly assigned to the Prejudice State Norm read that only 20% of state residents supported the BLM movement, whereas those in the Egalitarian State Norm read that 87% of state residents supported the BLM movement. BLM = Black lives matter.

less positive town-level evaluations, due to less costly allyship engagement. This study was not pre-registered.

Method

Participants. An a priori power analysis (G*Power, Faul et al., 2007) for a 2×2 between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to determine the desired sample size with 95% power to detect a small-medium effect ($f = 0.25$). This revealed a desired sample size of 251. We oversampled with 376 participants to account for exclusions. Participants who identified as Black Americans who resided in the United States were recruited via Prolific in May 2025. Those who failed two out of three instructional attention check questions ($n = 16$), including those who did not identify as Black or African American ($n = 34$) were excluded, resulting in a final sample size of 342.⁷ See Table 1 for demographics.

Procedure. After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to read an ostensible news article with a state report (no state name provided, see Figure 3). Those assigned to the *Prejudicial State Climate* condition read an article describing survey results where 20% of state residents indicated agreement with survey items expressing support for racial equality between White and Black Americans, believing that Black Americans still face prejudice and discrimination, and who support BLM protests to support racial equality. Those assigned to the *Egalitarian State Climate* condition read that 87% of participants had endorsed such items. State

climate percentages were adapted from previous research (Chaney et al., 2026). Participants completed two manipulation checks with analyses indicating participants correctly indicated the state climate condition (see Supplemental Material for analyses) before being randomly assigned to one of two town ISC conditions. Afterward, participants were randomly assigned to view the All or Single ISC Town condition materials from Study 1. Participants then completed outcomes of interest (see Table 4 for reliabilities) indicated below and demographic information, were debriefed, and compensated. Participants completed Study 1 measures.

Results

Analyses were conducted as 2 (State Climate: Egalitarian, Prejudice) $\times 2$ (Town Consensus: All ISC Town, Single ISC Town) between-subject ANOVAs. See Table 4 for ANOVA statistics and Table 5 for descriptive statistics.

There was only a significant main effect of State Climate on perceived storefront internal motives. Participants perceived fewer internal diversity motives for the storefront adopting the ISC in the Prejudice, compared to Egalitarian State Climate. In contrast, only a significant main effect of Town Consensus emerged on perceived external diversity motives. Participants perceived greater external motives for the storefront adopting the ISC in the All ISC Town compared to the Single ISC Town.

There were significant main effects of both State Climate and Town Consensus on anticipated Black residents' quality of

Table 4. Study 2, ANOVA Results.

Outcomes and reliabilities	State climate main effect			Town consensus main effect			State climate $\times$ town interaction		
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Store. Internal motives ($\alpha = .89$)	4.09	<.001	0.22	3.18	.076	0.19	2.40	.122	0.17
Store. External motives ($\alpha = .83$)	1.70	.194	0.14	6.55	.011	0.28	3.22	.074	0.19
Town progressive policy ($\alpha = .93$)	40.97	<.001	0.70	50.34	<.001	0.77	4.31	.039	0.23
Black QOL ($\alpha = .96$)	35.75	<.001	0.65	8.76	.003	0.32	1.87	.172	0.16
% of Black residents	13.72	<.001	0.40	8.89	.003	0.33	0.15	.697	0.00

Note. $F(1,338)$. Bolded outcomes indicate statistical significance: State Climate main effect was significant for perceived storefront internal motives, anticipated progressive town policy, Black quality of life, and percentage of Black residents. Main effects for Town Consensus were significant for perceived storefront external motives, anticipated town progressive policy, Black quality of life, and percentage of Black residents. Main effects were qualified by a significant interaction for anticipated town progressive policy. QOL = quality of life.

Table 5. Study 2 Descriptive Statistics.

Outcome	State climate condition		Town consensus condition	
	Prejudice climate	Egalitarian climate	All ISC town	Single ISC town
	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Store. Internal motives	5.91 (0.07)	6.11 (0.07)	6.10 (0.07)	5.92 (0.07)
Store. External motives	4.74 (0.10)	4.92 (0.10)	5.01 (0.10)	4.65 (0.10)
Town's progressive policies	4.61 (0.10)	5.49 (0.10)	5.54 (0.10)	4.56 (0.10)
Black QOL	3.89 (0.11)	4.80 (0.11)	4.57 (0.11)	4.12 (0.11)
% of Black residents	46.83 (2.04)	57.40 (2.00)	56.37 (2.01)	47.86 (2.03)

Note. ISC = identity-safety cue; SE = standard error; QOL = quality of life.

life, percentage of Black residents, and progressive town policies. Participants in the Egalitarian State Climate and All ISC Town conditions report greater Black quality of life, percentage of Black residents, and progressive town policies compared to participants in the Prejudice State Climate and Single ISC Town conditions. However, main effects for anticipated progressive town policies were qualified by a significant interaction.

Probing the interaction by Town Consensus revealed a simple effect of State Climate in both the All ISC Town, $F(1,338) = 9.43$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.33$, and the Single ISC Town condition, $F(1,338) = 35.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$. When all storefronts in the town displayed a BLM flag, the town was perceived as enacting less socially progressive policies in the Prejudice Climate ($M = 5.24$, $SE = 0.13$) than the Egalitarian Climate ($M = 5.83$, $SE = 0.14$). This effect was similar, but significantly larger, when only one storefront in the town displayed a BLM flag (Prejudice Climate, $M = 3.98$, $SE = 0.14$; Egalitarian Climate, $M = 5.15$, $SE = 0.13$).

When probing the interaction instead by State Climate, there was a simple effect of Town Consensus in both the Prejudice, $F(1,338) = 41.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$, and the Egalitarian Climate, $F(1,338) = 12.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$. In the Prejudice Climate, the town where all storefronts displayed the BLM flag was perceived as enacting more progressive policies compared to the town with only one BLM

flag. This effect was similar, but significantly smaller in the Egalitarian Climate.

Discussion

Contrary to predictions, participants used different contextual information to make inferences of a storefront's diversity motives; Perceived internal motives were dependent on higher-level state climate, while perceived external motives were dependent on local-level town ISC consensus. Yet, positive town evaluations, particularly demographics and quality of life, indicated effects of *both* town ISC consensus and state climates. Greater indicators of egalitarianism, whether in the form of state attitudes or town ISCs, promoted more positive town evaluations for Black Americans.

Interactive effects of perceived racial climate and ISC consensus were null across outcomes except for perceived progressive town policies. High (and low) ISC consensus towns elicited greater perceptions of progressive town policies in egalitarian racial climates than prejudicial racial climates, contrary to hypotheses. Thus, high ISC town consensus did not weaken or moderate the effects of identity-threatening racial climate (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026; Pietri et al., 2025). This may suggest positive diversity attributions and town evaluations are elicited when racial climate and

ISC consensus align, compared to misalign, consistent with prior research on (in)congruence of local-level ISCs (e.g., Alt et al., 2026; Pham & Chaney, 2026; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Wilton et al., 2020).

Study 3

Study 3 sought to narrow the scope of perceived racial climate to the “county-level” using ostensible, aggregate Black-White IAT findings. Aggregate level IAT data is associated with structural racism indices (Calanchini et al., 2022; Hehman et al., 2021), consistent with the ‘bias of the crowds’ model of prejudice (Payne et al., 2017, 2019). We sought to examine how pro-White IAT aggregate findings, equal White-Black preference aggregate findings, or the absence of IAT data informs expectations of motives and town evaluations. Egalitarian racial climates were operationalized as having “equal” implicit preference, or pairing of good and bad words, to both White and Black people to present a nuanced “egalitarian” climate that was not merely “pro-Black” explicit attitudes, as in Study 2. We also included a control condition for county-level racial attitudes, where no IAT findings were present.

Generally, we hypothesized that main effects of county racial climate and town ISC consensus would emerge, such that: (a) pro-White bias counties would elicit negative town evaluations and perceptions of a storefront as less genuinely motivated to value diversity (i.e., low external motives, high internal motives) than counties without racial climate information and counties with equal White-Black preference; (b) high ISC consensus towns would elicit more positive town evaluations and perceptions of a storefront as more genuinely motivated compared to low ISC consensus towns.

Further, we hypothesized an interactive effect for perceptions of a storefront’s diversity motives, such that Black Americans would perceive greater perceptions of external and fewer internal motives in high ISC consensus towns compared to low ISC consensus towns. This effect would be stronger in counties with equal White-Black preference, followed by counties without attitude information, and then counties with pro-White bias. If genuine diversity motives were critical for facilitating positive town evaluations, our hypotheses followed that high ISC consensus towns, compared to low ISC consensus towns, would elicit more positive town evaluations in identity-threatening county racial climates (i.e., counties with pro-White bias attitudes) than other county contexts (i.e., equal preference or no county info). This study was pre-registered (OSF link: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UK2JV>). We report all pre-registered primary analyses and note any deviations from the preregistered analysis plan.

Method

Participants. An a priori power analysis (G*Power, Faul et al., 2007) for a 2×3 between-subjects ANOVA was

conducted to determine the desired sample size with 80% power to detect a medium effect, based on the average effect size of Study 2 ($f = 0.30$). This revealed a desired sample size of 489. We aimed to oversample with 500 Black American participants to account for exclusions but only recruited 497 participants due to a stopping error.

Participants who identified as Black Americans residing in the United States were recruited via Prolific in September 2025. Those who failed two out of three instructional attention check questions ($n = 1$) or who did not identify as Black or African American ($n = 1$) were excluded, resulting in a final sample size of 495 participants.⁸ See Table 1 for demographics.

Procedure. Across conditions, participants first read about recent ostensible county-level survey results from the White-Black IAT. No identifying state or county information was indicated in the article. Participants read general information about what the IAT is, paired with visuals of the good and bad word trials with White and Black faces (i.e., “Implicit bias scores indicate how quickly people pair evaluations (e.g., good or bad words) and social groups (e.g., White and Black people) . . .,” see Supplemental Material for full materials).

After reading basic IAT information, participants were randomly assigned to one of three county-climate conditions: Pro-White Bias, Equal White-Black Preference, and No State Information (Control). In the *Pro-White Bias County Climate* condition, participants read about county IAT results that indicated most counties had pro-White implicit bias. Those in the *Equal White-Black Preference County Climate* condition read about how most counties had equal preference for good and bad words with White and Black people; thus, residents did not have implicit bias toward either group. Those in the *No Info* condition learned that the residents did not take the IAT, so their implicit preferences could not be determined.

Participants assigned to the Pro-White Bias County Climate and Equal White-Black Preference County Climate read about the researcher’s interpretation of aggregate county-level IAT data (see Figure 4).⁹ Specifically, participants read that individual-level IAT information may not predict one’s discriminatory behavior and that group-level IAT data may indicate other forms of structural inequalities in the environment, consistent with the “bias of the crowd” model of aggregate implicit attitude research (Calanchini et al., 2022; Hehman et al., 2021; Payne et al., 2017, 2019). The county-IAT results were accompanied with a visualization of the data (see Figure 5) adapted from a university online press publication that covered Calanchini et al. (2022) findings (Warren, 2022). Across all conditions, participants had to correctly answer a content check question about the counties’ aggregate-level IAT information (see Supplemental Material for full analyses).

Then, participants were shown the same figure that depicted the counties’ IAT findings from their condition

Pro-White Bias IAT Article	Equal White-Black Preference IAT Article
<p>Figure 1 shows the averaged results of residents who completed the IAT. For example, people in the orange-colored counties demonstrated evidence for an implicit preference for pairing bad words, versus good words, for Black people relative to White people. Thus, people in the orange-colored counties hold more implicit bias favoring White people versus Black people.</p> <p>The researchers caution that IAT scores do not strongly predict individual-level discriminatory behavior. Meaning, one person's score on an IAT cannot determine if they might next engage in discrimination. However, aggregate implicit bias findings, like findings presented here at the state or county-level, are more strongly related to discriminatory outcomes among White and Black people.</p> <p>So, researchers hypothesize that aggregate implicit bias attitudes may be a result of the environment. For example, certain regions may have stronger associations of "good" and "bad" with White or Black people, depending on factors like history of and current racial oppression in laws (e.g., Jim Crow, voter suppression, or gerrymandering) and segregated housing and educational systems in that state.</p>	<p>Figure 1 shows the averaged results of residents who completed the IAT. For example, people in the green-colored counties demonstrated evidence for an implicit preference for pairing good and bad words equally for White and Black people. Thus, people in green-colored counties hold more egalitarian or "equal" views toward White and Black people.</p> <p>The researchers caution that IAT scores do not strongly predict individual-level discriminatory behavior. Meaning, one person's score on an IAT cannot determine if they might next engage in discrimination. However, aggregate implicit bias findings, like findings presented here at the state or county-level, are more strongly related to discriminatory outcomes among White and Black people.</p> <p>So, researchers hypothesize that aggregate implicit bias attitudes may be a result of the environment. For example, certain regions may have stronger associations of "good" and "bad" with White or Black people, depending on factors like history of and current racial oppression in laws (e.g., Jim Crow, voter suppression, or gerrymandering) and segregated housing and educational systems in that state.</p>

Figure 4. Study 3 County-Climate Condition Materials.
Note. A portion of the Pro-White Bias condition and Equal White-Black Preference article condition materials are presented. The articles reference "Figure 1," which is displayed in the manuscript's Figure 5.

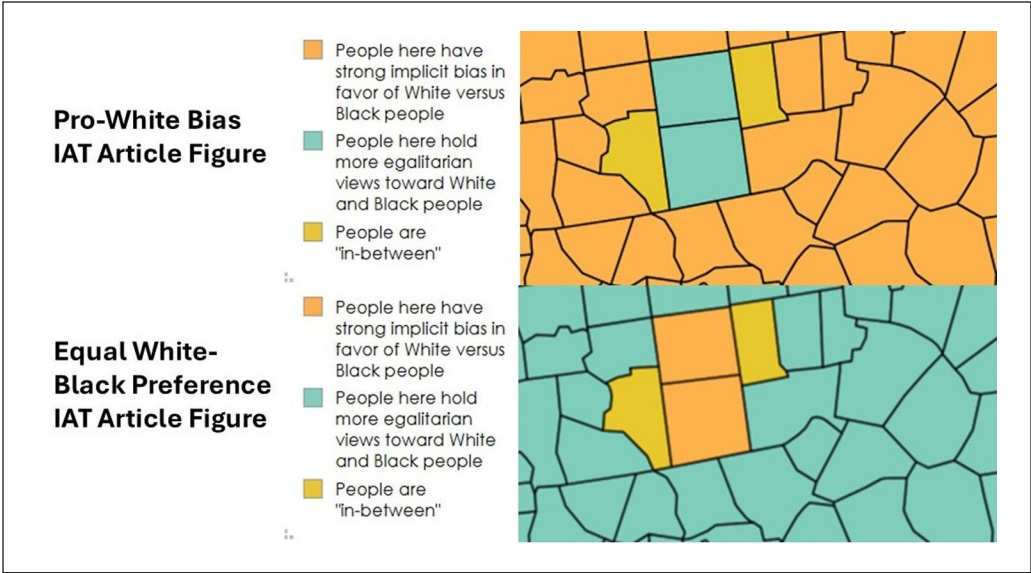


Figure 5. Study 3 County Climate Manipulation (Higher-Level Identity-Cues).
Note. The visuals from the article materials in the Pro-White Bias condition and Equal White-Black Preference article condition materials are presented.

again, this time with a single county circled that they were going to review images from (see Supplemental Material). Participants were randomly assigned to view one of two town photo tours, either the Single or All ISC Safety Cue conditions from Studies 1 to 2. After participants completed Study 2 outcomes (scale reliabilities presented in Table 5), demographic information, were debriefed, and compensated.

Results

Analyses were conducted as 2 (Town Consensus: All ISC, Single ISC) × 3 (County Climate: No info (Control), Pro-White Implicit Bias, Equal White-Black Preference) between-subject ANOVAs. See Table 6 for ANOVA statistics and Table 7 for descriptive statistics. LSD post hoc tests were

Table 6. Study 3, ANOVA Results.

Outcomes and reliabilities	County climate main effect			Town consensus main effect			County climate $\times$ town consensus interaction		
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Store. Internal motives ($\alpha = .91$)	6.51	.002	0.33	0.63	.427	0.06	0.93	.397	0.13
Store. External motives ($\alpha = .81$)	1.36	.257	0.16	53.14	<.001	0.66	2.02	.134	0.18
Town progressive policy ($\alpha = .92$)	17.69	<.001	0.54	69.15	<.001	0.75	0.89	.413	0.13
Black QOL ($\alpha = .95$)	15.29	<.001	0.51	21.84	<.001	0.42	0.68	.506	0.11
% of Black residents	6.89	<.001	0.33	16.50	<.001	0.37	2.37	.095	0.20

Note. *F*(1,489) for ISC Town Condition, *F*(2,489) for County Climate and County Climate $\times$ Town ISC interaction. Bold outcomes indicate statistical significance: County Climate main effect was significant for perceived storefront internal motives, anticipated progressive town policy, Black quality of life, and percentage of Black residents. Main effects for Town Consensus were significant for perceived storefront external motives, anticipated town progressive policy, Black quality of life, and percentage of Black residents. ISC = identity-safety cue; QOL = quality of life.

Table 7. Study 3 Descriptive Statistics by Condition.

Outcome	County climate condition			Town consensus condition	
	Pro-White bias	Equal White-Black preference	No county info	All ISC town	Single ISC town
	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Store. Internal motives	5.36 (0.09)	5.79 (0.09)	5.67 (0.09)	5.65 (0.07)	5.57 (0.07)
Store. External motives	4.58 (0.10)	4.72 (0.10)	4.50 (0.10)	5.01 (0.08)	4.19 (0.08)
Town's progressive policies	4.14 (0.10)	4.96 (0.10)	4.72 (0.10)	5.09 (0.08)	4.13 (0.08)
Black QOL	4.30 (0.10)	5.06 (0.10)	4.83 (0.10)	4.99 (0.08)	4.46 (0.08)
% of Black Residents	35.36 (1.94)	45.29 (1.91)	42.14 (1.95)	45.46 (1.59)	36.40 (1.57)

Note. ISC = identity-safety cue; SE = standard error; QOL = quality of life.

Table 8. Study 3 LSD Post Hoc Comparisons of County Climate Conditions.

Outcome	Contrast	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI [LL, UL]
Store. Internal motives	PW bias vs. EP	0.35	<.001	[-0.67, -0.19]
	PW bias vs. C	0.27	.012	[-0.56, -0.07]
	EP vs. C	0.10	.334	[-0.12, 0.36]
Town's progressive policies	PW bias vs. EP	0.59	<.001	[-1.10, -0.55]
	PW bias vs. C	0.41	<.001	[-0.87, -0.30]
	EP vs. C	0.18	.091	[-0.04, 0.52]
Black QOL	PW bias vs. EP	0.57	<.001	[-1.03, -0.48]
	PW bias vs. C	0.40	<.001	[-0.81, -0.25]
	EP vs. C	0.16	.109	[-0.05, 0.50]
% of Black residents	PW bias vs. EP	0.39	<.001	[-15.28, -4.57]
	PW bias vs. C	0.27	.014	[-12.18, -1.37]
	EP vs. C	0.13	.248	[-2.21, 8.51]

Note. PW bias = Pro-White bias condition; EP = equal White-Black preference condition; C = no county information (control) condition; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; QOL = quality of life; LSD = Fisher's Least Significant Difference.

conducted to probe significant County Climate main effects, see Table 8.

Replicating findings from Study 2, there was only a significant main effect of County Climate on perceived internal diversity motives, and a significant main effect of Town

Consensus condition on perceived external motives; no interactions emerged. Participants perceived fewer internal motives for the storefront adopting the ISC in the Pro-White Bias County Climate than both the Equal-Preference and Control County Climate conditions, which did not significantly differ.

In comparison, participants perceived greater external motives for the storefront adopting the ISC in the All ISC town than the Single ISC town.

As in Study 2, significant main effects of both County Climate and Town Consensus emerged for remaining outcomes. Post-hoc differences by County Climate indicate that participants in the Pro-White Bias County condition reported fewer expectations of progressive town policies, anticipated lower Black residents' quality of life, and a lower percentage of Black town residents, compared to both the Equal White-Black Preference and No Information County Climate conditions, which did not significantly differ. Examining the significant effects of Town Consensus revealed that when all storefronts had a BLM flag, participants inferred greater progressive town policies, better Black residents' quality of life, and a higher percentage of Black residents, compared to when a single storefront had a BLM flag. No significant interactions emerged.

Discussion

Study 3 results largely mirrored findings from Study 2. Higher-level, county climate cues impacted attributions of internal motivations, whereas local-level town ISC consensus impacted attributions of external motives for a storefront's ISC adoption. Yet, both higher- and local-level cues impacted town evaluations. Identity-safe racial climates, compared to identity-threatening climates, resulted in perceptions of more positive town evaluations, as did high ISC town consensus compared to low ISC town consensus. In confirming Study 2 findings, Study 3 demonstrates that higher-level racial climate does function as an ITC or ISC via aggregate attitude information (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026). Thus, a higher-level ISC functioned similarly to traditional local-level ISCs (e.g., Kruk & Matsick, 2021; Pietri et al., 2025). Of note, counties without racial climate information elicited positive town evaluations and greater perceived storefront internal motives, compared to prejudicial county climates, perhaps suggesting a default inference of inclusion when no attitude information is known but an ISC (at least one) is present.

General Discussion

The present research examined how manipulating town-level consensus of posting a BLM flag (i.e., an ISC) across storefronts impacts racial minorities' town evaluations and perceived motives behind the ISC adoption (Study 1–3). This research further considered the integration of higher-level identity-relevant cues, such as purported racial climate via explicit state-level Black equality attitudes (Study 2) or implicit county-level White-Black attitudes (Study 3). We provide initial evidence that marginalized perceivers simultaneously attend to different levels of contextual identity-relevant cues: perceived racial climate of the higher-level surrounding physical space (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026) and

how normative the ISC is in the local context (e.g., Chaney et al., 2026; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025). Our investigation coincides with nascent theoretical frameworks that highlight the importance of context in facilitating pathways to identity-safety and allyship (i.e., Chaney et al., 2025; Moser & Wiley, 2025; Pietri et al., 2025).

We considered perceptions of a storefront's internal or external motives for adopting an ISC. Perceived genuine motives of displaying ISCs in organizational contexts have been pertinent for whether racial, gender, or sexual minorities report identity-safety (Chaney et al., 2026; Derricks et al., 2025; Kroeper et al., 2022; Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025; Thai & Nylund, 2024; Wilton et al., 2020). Our research highlights that high consensus of displaying the BLM flag in a town, compared to ambiguous or weak consensus, elicited perceptions of greater external, self-interested diversity motives (Study 1–3). Yet, high consensus of ISCs posted throughout the town also facilitated positive town evaluations for racial minorities (Study 1) and Black people (Study 2–3) compared to low ISC consensus in the town. Of note, the effects of ISC consensus occurred with expression-based ISCs, such as inclusive imagery flags (Pereira-Jorge et al., 2026), which incur less time and resource allocation compared to evidence-based ISCs (e.g., inclusive racial policies and events, Derricks et al., 2025; Wilton et al., 2020). Indeed, a strong consensus of BLM flags across the town signaled a generally “supportive” environment for Black Americans – where all residents are perceived to be in agreement with their support of the BLM movement – relative to low consensus towns with only one BLM flag. Our research contributes to the nuance of normative ISCs in novel public spaces, here with public-facing ISCs that impact not just perceptions of the store, but also the town.

Marginalized group members use a variety of environmental information to infer how they will be treated (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Kruk & Matsick, 2021; Steele et al., 2002), even when such information is conflicting (e.g., Alt et al., 2026; Wilton et al., 2020). While past research has considered the interaction of identity-relevant cues within a single level of context, we expand this research to demonstrate how the higher-level racial climate impacts evaluations of the local context. We explored higher-level identity-relevant cues via state-level BLM support (Study 2) and county-level implicit preferences of White and Black people (Study 3). Incorporating research on space-focused judgments, Black people reported greater expectations of socially progressive policies within a town, greater quality of life for Black residents, and greater percentages of Black residents in ostensible egalitarian racial climates compared to prejudicial racial climates (Study 2–3). Of note, town evaluations were similar when the egalitarian racial climate of the town was made explicit, or when racial climate was not stated (Study 3).

Different from our hypothesized predictions, state- or county-level racial climate and town-level ISC consensus

information largely exhibited independent effects on town evaluations and perceived storefront diversity motives (Study 2–3). Interestingly, marginalized perceivers utilized different contextual information to form inferences of the critical storefront's diversity attributions: Higher-level egalitarian racial climates elicited perceptions of a single storefront as being more internally motivated to value diversity compared to prejudicial racial climates (Study 2–3), but external motives were influenced only by ISC town consensus (Study 1–3).

A Nice But Suspicious Town? Reconciling Multiple Identity-Based Cues

Perceived external diversity motives were consistently influenced by town-level ISC consensus information, not perceived racial climate (Study 2–3). This may suggest that how normative an ISC is in a potential consumer context is most relevant for determining “surface-level” or “performative” motives to express support for Black people (e.g., strategy-driven motives, White & Carter, 2026). Critically, assessments of external diversity motives often, including the present research, tap into a behavior being attributed to social pressure to adhere to an egalitarian norm, often to avoid social costs for violating the perceived norm. Amidst the specific issue of police brutality that pervades Black communities, perceivers might be wary that the storefronts do not “understand the weight behind” the BLM flag (Rayneese Primrose, cited in McGrady, 2021).

In contrast to the evaluations of the storefront, high ISC town consensus elicited positive town evaluations compared to low ISC town consensus – which may suggest high ISC consensus elicits both negative and positive identity-based expectations. For example, high ISC consensus for pronoun-sharing at an organization elicits lower expectations of LGBTQ+ allyship from a person who shares their pronouns, but greater expectations of procedural fairness at the organization, compared to low ISC consensus pronoun-sharing (i.e., normative eclipsing effect, Pereira-Jorge et al., 2025). That is, while high ISC consensus information may elicit suspicion of an individual actor (person or storefront), high ISC consensus also signals greater expectations of fair policies and procedures in that surrounding area. Indeed, high ISC consensus towns compared to low ISC consensus towns elicited greater expectations of progressive policies in both prejudicial and egalitarian state climates (Study 2). The present research emphasizes the importance of examining both expectations from those who adopt the ISC (i.e., storefront) and expectations from the surrounding area of the ISC (i.e., residents and policies, see Figure 1).

Interestingly, the storefront's perceived internal motives for valuing diversity were consistently and independently impacted by the higher-level identity-cue, *not* town-level ISC consensus information (Study 2–3). This may be a product of the higher-level identity-cue indicating resident's

attitudes and values, though future research should consider how other higher-level cues may impact such evaluations. Further, egalitarian racial climates elicited positive town evaluations compared to prejudicial climates. Prejudicial climates, serving as an ITC and indicator of structural stigma, elicited negative evaluations of towns that were generally not ameliorated by high ISC consensus within the town (Study 2–3). Climate, as an identity-based cue that assesses aggregate racial attitudes, may outweigh low-cost, public-facing ISCs, consistent with other mixed ITC and ISC research (e.g., Pham & Chaney, 2026; Pietri et al., 2025; Wilton et al., 2020). Thus, racial climate may be perceived as a more stable feature of residents' social justice commitments, impacting both perceived internal motives for diversity and town evaluations.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, we assessed outcomes of perceived motives and town evaluations from fictitious towns with fictitious racial histories. Further, our observed effects of ISC town consensus and racial climate on town evaluations may not translate to how structural stigma manifests in real-world places and towns (e.g., Graham et al., 2016; Keene & Padilla, 2014; Payne & Hannay, 2021). For example, qualitative research from LGBTQ+ individuals highlights the rarity of visual LGBTQ+ ISCs in rural midwestern settings and that a single Pride flag in a neighborhood is meaningful (e.g., Barnes-Gilbert & Prock, 2025; Campen et al., 2022). Yet, rural and midwestern areas may have pockets of strong LGBTQ+ culture and resources (Stone, 2018; Woodell, 2018). Thus, climate toward one's marginalized identity may moderate the impact of visual ISCs, either boosting or weakening the effect of the ISC, as originally hypothesized, when such identity-relevant cues are situated in real racialized spaces. Of note, certain motivational mindsets may mitigate the negative impact of identity-threatening contexts (Green et al., 2021), including mixed ISCs and ITCs in interpersonal interactions (Wout et al., 2014). Though not explored in this research, individual motivation (e.g., collective action for racial justice) may be critical in mitigating negative space-focused judgments from prejudicial racial climates and promoting intentions to engage with one's space.

We encourage future qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to investigate what identity-relevant cues people spontaneously use to make inferences about towns, including how perceived (or actual) state (or county) climates may impact town evaluations from the variety of ISCs marginalized individuals attend to (e.g., Kruk & Matsick, 2021; Lim & Hehman, 2026; Pietri et al., 2025). Further, as is the case with most experimental examinations of ISCs, we examine such cues as a snapshot in time. The duration of the cue or knowledge of a historical commitment to diversity and inclusion (e.g., Li et al., 2022; Ponce de Leon et al., 2024) may be especially relevant for how ISCs are evaluated in high or low consensus ISC

environments. Longitudinal work should examine when new or old cues are replaced or removed to gain a holistic understanding of how contextual information shifts perceptions of ISCs. We also did not randomize the ordering of climate ISC and town-level ISC information. Given the ordering of identity-threat or identity-safety information may impact identity-based evaluations (e.g., Pietri et al., 2025), our current design limits the generalizability of our effects.

Further, consensus of ISCs, within an organization and across physical spaces like a town or neighborhood, are nuanced and complex. Notably, our manipulation of ISC consensus included the exact same ISC presented frequently, or once, in the town. Yet, people and organizations may present various cues in a town, ranging across marginalized groups, across issues (e.g., affordable housing vs. immigration), and across ideologies (a BLM flag may be present near a “Blue Lives Matter” flag). We utilized low-cost, expression-based ISCs of a single issue. In contrast, evidence-based ISCs reflect embodied practices of one’s commitment to diversity. High town-level consensus with some stores displaying the BLM flag, having Black managers and personnel, and festivals and events that center local Black creators may elicit greater perceived internal diversity motives for a single storefront, given how the town engages in both evidence-based and expression-based commitments to celebrating and uplifting Black residents. We encourage future research on the presence of multiple ISCs to consider these unique configurations.

Additionally, the effect of racial climate on perceived storefront internal motives, and town ISC consensus on perceived external motives, may emerge because of the unique stance businesses hold in maintaining profits – with participants aware that at times diversity stances yield a favorable reputation with the public and stakeholders (e.g., Associated Press, 2025; Dennison, 2025; White & Carter, 2026). Assessing the certainty of diversity attributions may disentangle whether certain identity-relevant information (i.e., racial climate, consensus) is “weighted” more when making attributions. Moreover, we did not examine perceived diversity motives of the ostensible town residents nor the other storefronts who did, or did not, adopt the BLM flag. Thus, it is unclear if high ISC consensus in a town would always elicit perceptions of more external diversity motives compared to low ISC consensus in a town.

Nevertheless, we underscore that consumer spaces that engage in corporate social responsibility (e.g., Carroll, 2015), social and ethical practices that enhance the corporation’s relationship with the community must contend with how their diversity and inclusion actions are evaluated in comparison to other diversity and inclusion actions in the consumer space (e.g., town-level consensus information). Corporations should consider how their expressed and stated values to racial diversity are aligned or misaligned with the broader consensus of racial inequality in that region. For example, AI data centers are stored in historically low-income, Black communities (Chow, 2025), exacerbating

ongoing inequity in that community, which may undoubtedly shape how locals engage with that corporation. Future research is needed to more carefully interrogate how consumer spaces impact how places and spaces become racialized (Bonam et al., 2016), and how public-facing ISCs may combat or contribute to that space racialization.

Finally, the present research did not adapt common metrics of identity-safety such as belonging or organizational attraction, which may predict personal engagement with the environment (e.g., Pietri et al., 2025). Rather, we opted to integrate research on space-focused judgments to capture the multi-level nature of the present investigation of identity-relevant cues in a novel public space. Future research should examine common outcomes of identity-safety from town-level and climate-level ISCs, which may provide more nuance as to whether people may report more identity-safety at the level of a storefront or town, though not in the broader state or county surrounding the town. We also did not assess expectations of space connection (e.g., interest in visiting the storefront, Bonam et al., 2016) or identity-threat (e.g., anticipated racial stigma from workers at the store, Steele et al., 2002) at the store being evaluated for motives. Thus, while we expanded to consider the store, the town, and the state, our outcome measures did not capture each of these levels. Future research that accounts for these different levels in measurement will afford a more holistic picture of identity-safety in a town.

Conclusion

Over three studies ($N = 1,107$), we examined how the BLM flag, an ISC for Black Americans, is evaluated in fictitious public spaces. ISC consensus within a town impacted Black Americans’ expectations of a storefront’s motivations for valuing diversity and evaluations of the broader town (expectations of Black quality of life, socially progressive town policies for marginalized groups, and expected percentages of Black residents within the town, Study 1–3). Higher-level identity-relevant information, specifically egalitarian racial climate (state- and county-level) elicited greater perceptions of a store being internally motivated to value diversity (Study 2–3), compared to prejudicial climates, while high ISC consensus towns elicited greater perceptions of external motives to value diversity compared to low ISC consensus (Study 1–3). Further, high ISC consensus and higher-level egalitarian racial climates elicited, independently, more positive town evaluations compared to low ISC consensus and prejudicial racial climates (Study 2–3). This research highlights how multiple levels of identity-relevant information may shape racial minorities (Study 1) and Black Americans’ (Study 2–3) identity-based expectations of an environment.

Author Note

This research has not yet been published, and it is not under consideration at another journal. The institution where research was conducted at University at Buffalo, SUNY.

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Ethical Considerations

All participants in this research were treated in accordance with APA guidelines on ethical treatment of human subjects and the studies were approved by the University at Buffalo, SUNY's Institutional Review Board.

Consent to Participate

All participants indicated informed consent before participating in our studies.

Consent for Publication

All participants indicated that their data would be de-identified and shared for conferences and publications.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

AI Disclosure

The authors declared no use of AI in the generation, analysis, or writing of the present research.

Data Availability Statement

All data and materials are provided on OSF or in the Supplemental Materials, available through the anonymized link embedded in the manuscript. Data and materials will be made publicly available if the manuscript is accepted.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that spatial stigma, structural stigma, and institutional racism have unique insights into the oppression of marginalized groups, including Black people, in the United States. When using the term structural stigma, we generally refer to the oppressive institutional structures (e.g., legislative and governing bodies, policies) that determine the lived material conditions of marginalized individuals – which the aforementioned terms all describe as a central tenant in their respective fields of study.
2. Initial data recruitment and analysis plans were to examine Time as an independent variable, in addition to Safety Cue Norm. However, because the people of color (POC) sample was underpowered in Fall 2024 recruitment to compare to the Spring 2025 recruitment, datasets were merged for greater

statistical power of detecting the main effect of the safety-cue norm condition. When examining main outcomes with covariates of both Time and Black warmth, no differences emerged from the pattern of effects observed when just controlling for Black warmth. See Supplemental Material for details.

3. Exploratory analyses of a White undergraduate sample are available in the Supplemental Material. When controlling for Time of data collection and Black warmth, results indicate White participants make differential evaluations of perceived progressive town policies and estimated percentage of Black residents. No other outcomes were significant.
4. We assessed expectations of the percentage of people in the town who experience prejudice, discrimination, and racism in Study 1 to 2. While no significant conditional effects emerged, means across conditions were near scale midpoint (estimated bias ranging between 30% and 40%). See Supplemental Material for statistics.
5. Across studies, we conducted exploratory analyses controlling for estimates of Black residents in the town to examine whether our effects of ISC consensus and racial climate persisted above and beyond the implied presence of Black individuals. The effect of ISC Town consensus in Study 1 and State Climate ISC condition in Study 2 for perceived storefront internal motives were no longer significant. However, the significance of remaining outcomes did not differ when controlling for estimates of Black residents. See Supplemental Material for ANCOVA analyses.
6. When removing the covariate, perceived external diversity motives are no longer significant, but anticipated percentage of Black residents becomes significant. The remaining outcomes follow a similar pattern of effects as reported ANCOVAs. See Supplemental Material.
7. Differences did not emerge in exclusions by condition; See Supplemental Material for details.
8. No differences emerged by condition for exclusions; See Supplemental Material.
9. The language of the interpretation of individual-level IAT results in the Pro-White Bias and Equal White-Black Preference conditions was aligned with current Project Implicit Feedback FAQ (“does the IAT relate to behavior,” <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/faqs.html>).

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