

Going it Alone: Competition Increases the Attractiveness of Minority Status

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When and why would minorities want to join groups in which they'll be underrepresented?

Abstract

Past research demonstrates that people prefer to affiliate with others who resemble them demographically and ideologically. We posit that this preference may be overridden by a desire to stand out when competing for scarce opportunities. Across six experiments, we find that anticipated competition weakens people's desire to join groups including similar others. When expecting to compete against fellow group members, women prefer to join all-male groups, Black participants prefer to join all-White groups, and partisans prefer to join groups composed of members of the opposite political party at a significantly higher rate than they do in the absence of competition. Two follow-up studies show that participants' desire to stand out from other group members mediates this effect.

Background

Desire for Similarity in Groups: homophily, the tendency to affiliate with similar others, is a well-established phenomenon (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook 2001) that has emerged in voluntary work groups (Baugher, Varanelli, & Weisbord 2000). This tendency emerges in part due to similarity attraction (Byrne, 1997) and, for minorities, aversion to token status (Kanter, 1977).

Effects of Competition on Preferences: competition makes comparative social judgments salient and the desire to get noticed stronger (Ashmore et. al., 2001; Kilduff, 2014). Similar others are considered the most appropriate targets for these social comparison (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) and individuals strategically attempt to differentiate themselves when competing (Maslach, 1974).

Will the desire to stand out within a work group and avoid comparisons with similar others lead people to choose groups where they will be underrepresented when facing competition?

Study 1

Method: 278 Black participants recruited on MTurk and Prolific were asked to choose between two departments for a summer internship. Two conditions: department members will compete against each other for full-time jobs (*competitive*) or they won't compete for jobs (*control*).

Scenario: "Both of the departments you are considering for your summer internship are [collaborative] / [competitive] departments within the same company. Your key goal is to end this summer with a job. At this company, almost all summer interns in both / [25% of summer interns from each] of the departments you are considering will be offered a full-time job at the end of the summer, which means you don't have to compete against the other interns / [will be competing against the other interns] within your department to earn a full-time offer."

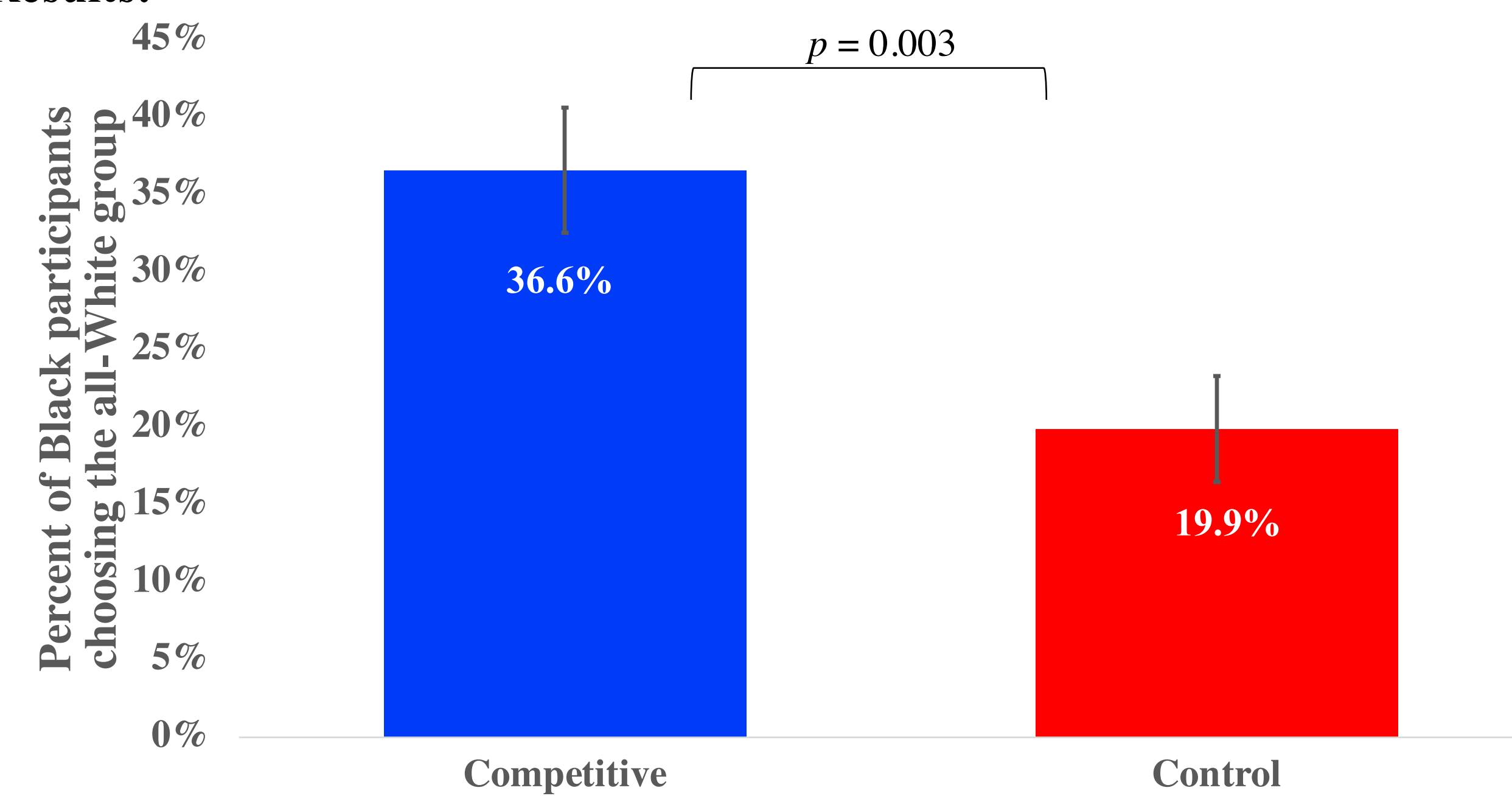
Question: Which of the two departments would you like to join for your summer internship at this organization?

Example stimulus:



Study 1

Results:

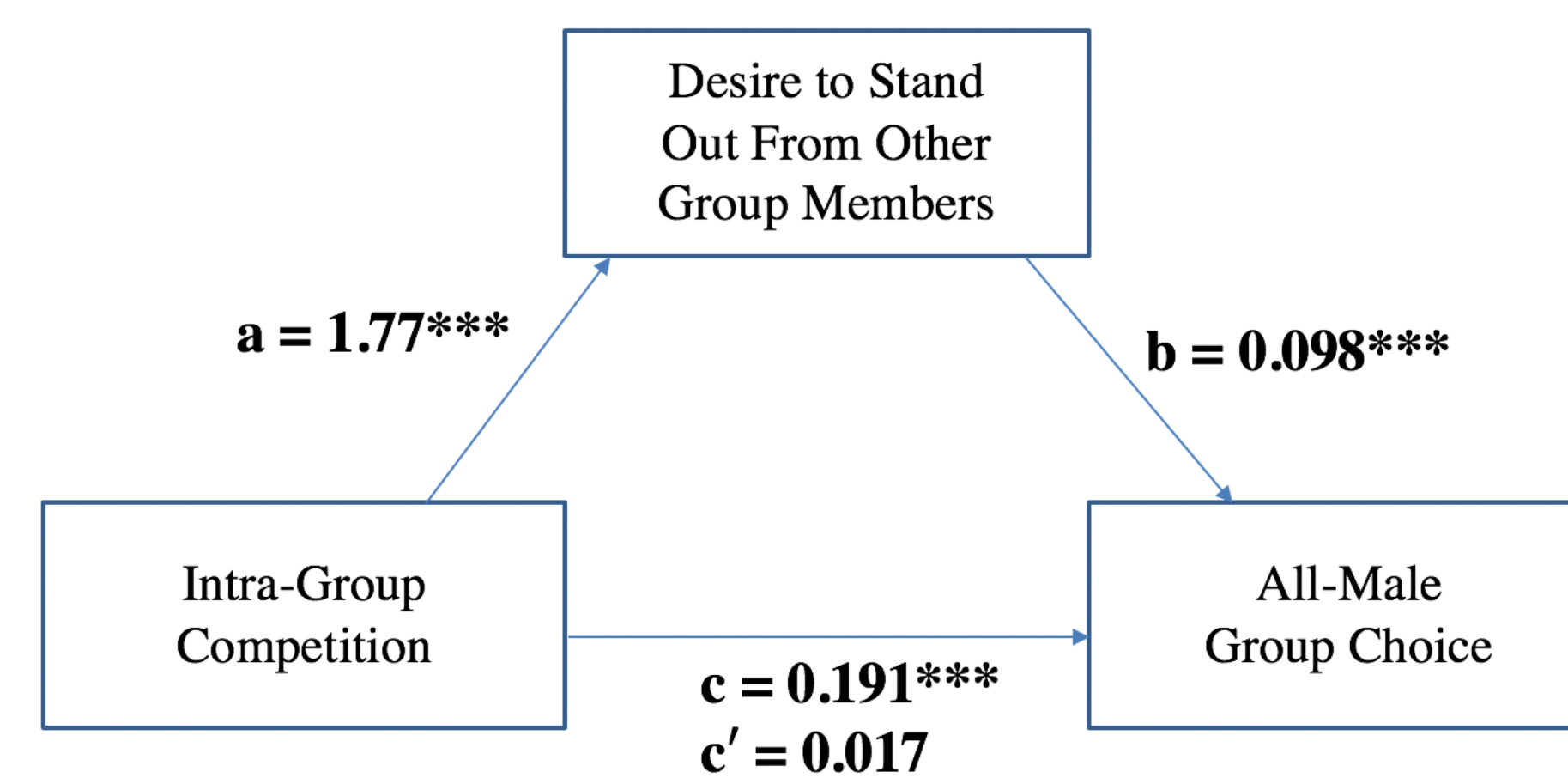
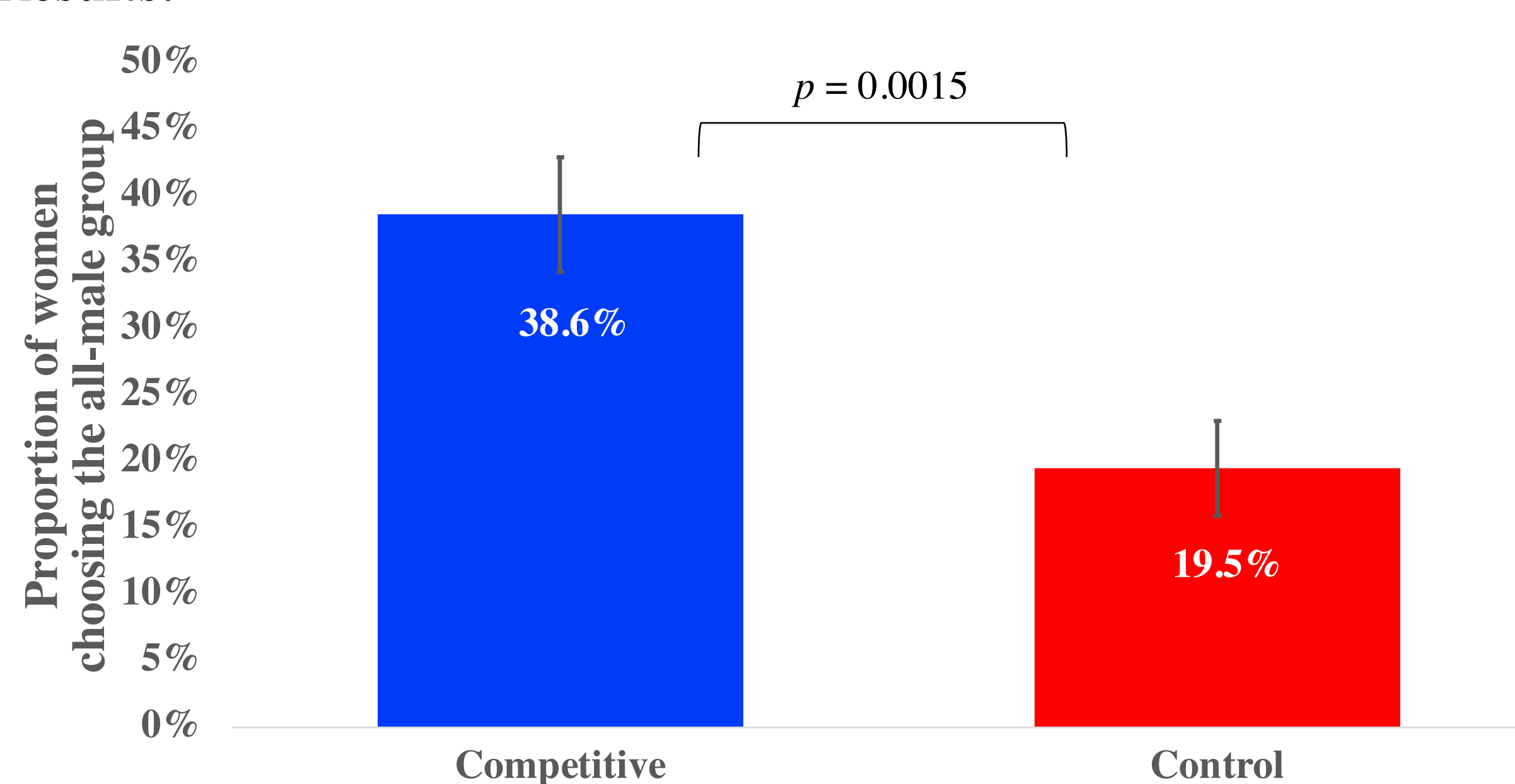


Study 2

Method: 250 women on MTurk were asked to choose between two departments for an internship. Two conditions: *competitive* and *control*.

Mediation Question: How much did a desire to stand out from other summer interns factor into your choice of department?" on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely)

Results:



* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

References

Ashmore, R. D., Jussim, L., & Wilder, D. (2001). *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*. Oxford University Press, Incorporated.

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Brewer, M. B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who Is This "We"? Levels of Collective Identity and Self Representations. 11. *Byrne, D. (1997). An Overview (and Underview) of Research and Theory within the Attraction Paradigm. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14(3), 417-431.

Kanter, R. M. (1977). Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(5), 965-990.

Kilduff, G. J. (2014). Driven to Win: Rivalry, Motivation, and Performance. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 5(8), 944-952.

Maslach, C. (1974). SOCIAL AND PERSONAL BASES OF INDIVIDUATION. 29(3), 411-425.

McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001a). Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 415-444.

Study 3

We sought to replicate our effect in an incentive-compatible context.

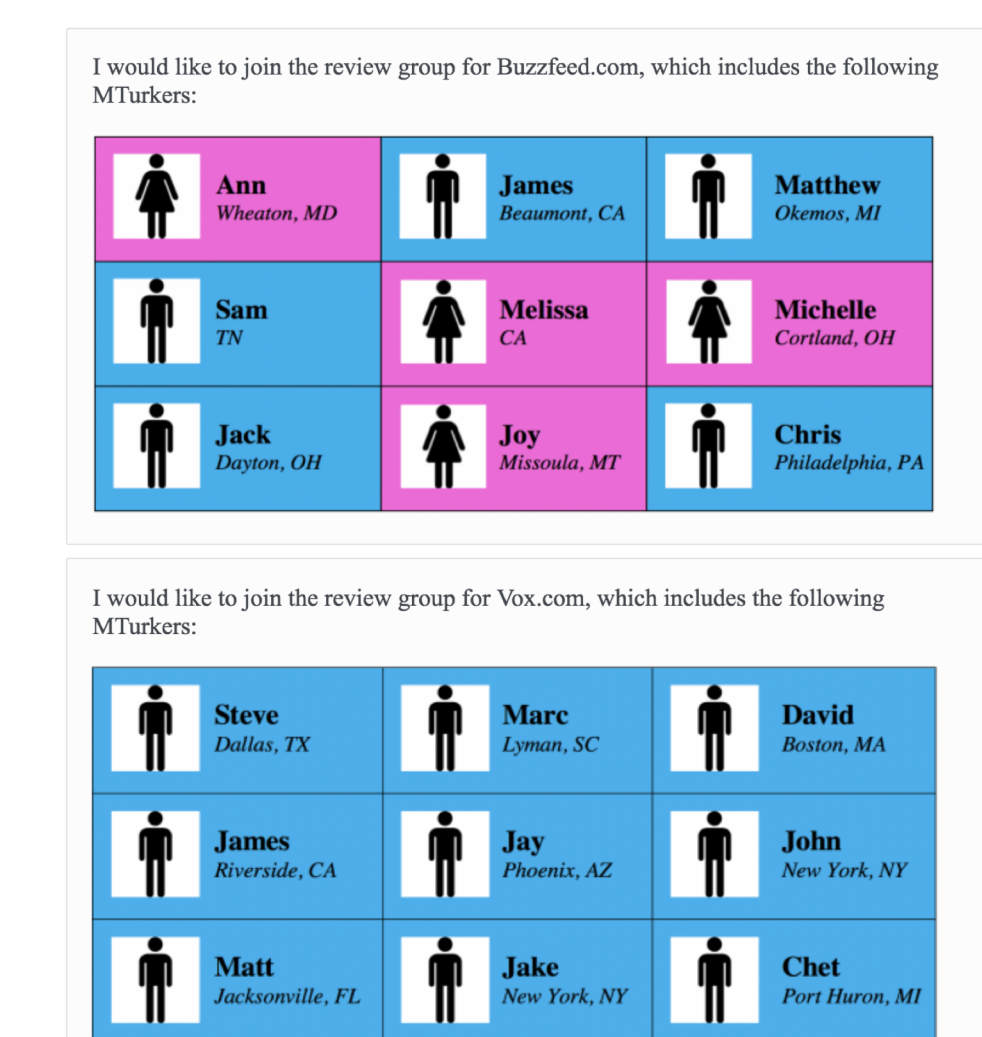
Method: 583 women were recruited on MTurk. Two conditions: *competitive* and *control*.

Instructions: Today, you will be asked to learn more about and write a review for a website in collaboration with a group of MTurkers, and you will get to choose which website you'll review (and therefore which group you'll join). Your review (and reviews from other MTurkers in your group) will actually be used to describe the website to a diverse group of consumers. We will be soliciting a total of ten reviews for each website from MTurkers in your group...After writing your review, you will have the opportunity to interact with other members of your group.

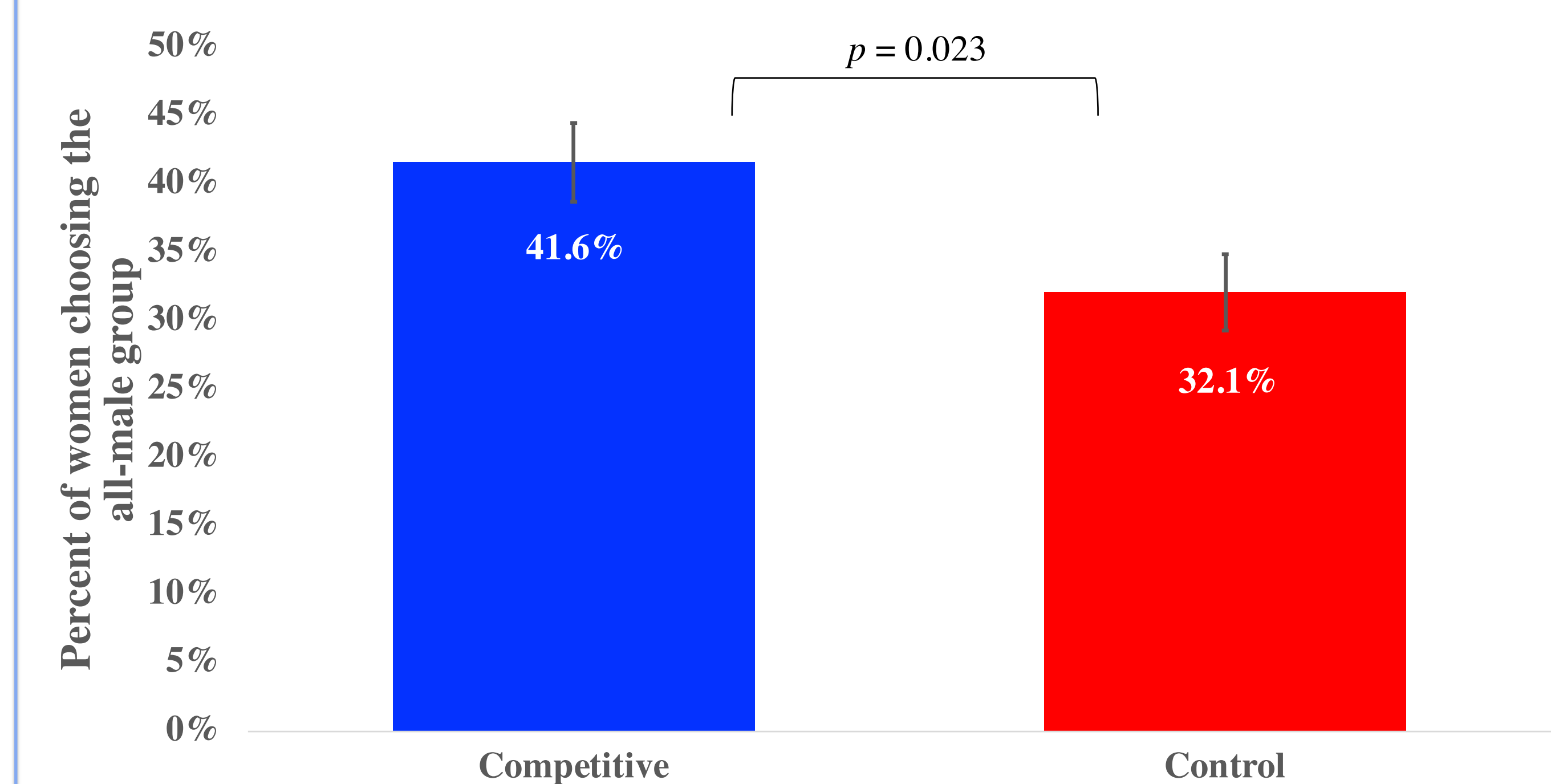
For each website, we will [select the three best reviews to use] / [use all of the reviews generated] with the goal of presenting a variety of opinions on the site. [Since only the best three reviews will be used, you will be competing intensely against other MTurkers in your website review group to receive a \$0.50 bonus.] / [Since all product reviews will be used, you will not be competing against other MTurkers in your website review group to receive a \$0.50 bonus.]

Question: Please indicate which review group you would like to join:

Example stimulus:



Results:



Conclusion

Competition for scarce opportunities serves as a counter-weight to preferences for similar others and increases the rate at which people choose to join groups in which they will be underrepresented. This effect replicates for women, Black people, and Republicans and Democrats.

Intra-group competition leads people to place greater value on the opportunity to stand out from other group members as the only person with their social identity, which in turn leads to the preferences we document.

Our findings highlight an important boundary condition to past research on homophily, shedding light on when and why minorities may prefer to join groups in which they will be underrepresented.

Questions and comments welcome. Email Erika Kirgios at ekirgios@wharton.upenn.edu