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Perceived educational and entertainment value of positive and negative portrayals of racial minority characters in films

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Abstract

Racial/ethnic minority characters are increasing in films; yet, despite increasing representation, less than half (39.7%) of all films in 2020 cast a main character who was a racial/ethnic minority. Because media representations can perpetuate racial/ethnic stereotypes, the present study examined if negative (compared to positive) racial/ethnic representations of Black and Chinese characters (and their cultures) in films impact individuals' evaluations of the educational and entertainment value of the content. One hundred and eight undergraduate students were randomly assigned to view scenes portraying African American and Chinese characters (and their cultures) positively or negatively from two popular animated films—*The Lion King* and *Mulan*, respectively. Participants then reported their perceptions of the educational and entertainment value of the content. Participants reported greater *entertainment* value when portrayals were positive compared to negative (regardless of the film). Additionally, participants perceived the portrayals of Chinese characters in *Mulan* to be more *educational* when they were positive compared to negative; however, the perceived *educational* value of portrayals of Black characters in *The Lion King* did not differ whether the portrayals were positive or negative. Given the value of films in people's lives, it is important to understand how racial/ethnic representations affect real-world evaluations.

Keywords: minority portrayals, media representations, racial representation, cultural representation

Perceived Educational and Entertainment Value of Positive and Negative Portrayals of Racial Minority Characters in Films

Despite what many people may like to believe, racial/ethnic prejudice remains pervasive in society (Yi et al., 2022). One way that racial/ethnic prejudice may be perpetuated is through mainstream media's notorious lack of representation of racial/ethnic minority characters. Interestingly, despite the notorious lack of representation, even when racial/ethnic minority characters are represented, they are often depicted as *unidimensional*, stereotypical, and inconsequential to the plot (Smith, 2013). Such limited and/or poor representations can perpetuate stereotypes (Monk-Turner et al., 2010) and may contribute to people's beliefs about racial/ethnic minority groups. Although recent research suggests that racial/ethnic minority characters may be increasing in films (Statista, 2023), only 39.7% of films in 2020 had a main character who was part of a racial/ethnic minority group. Consequently, there is a need to examine racial/ethnic minority characters in films and how representations shape people's perceptions. The purpose of the current study is to experimentally examine how representations of minority characters and their cultures in film affect viewers' perceptions of the educational and entertainment value of the content.

People who consume a lot of media—particularly television—often have worldviews that reflect the content of the consumed media (Bissel & Parrott, 2013; Dixon, 2008). For example, research has demonstrated that consuming more mainstream media is associated with heightened stereotypical perceptions of African Americans (Dixon, 2008). Interestingly, consuming more media—even if it is believed to be more “liberal” (e.g., *New York Times*) only influences the magnitude—not the absence—of negative racial/ethnic attitudes (Korver-Glenn et al., 2020). Overall, it appears that time spent watching television may be a reasonably good predictor of

negative attitudes towards racial/ethnic minority groups. Such results suggest that media portrayals can have a profound influence on individuals' attitudes.

The profound influence media may have on individuals' attitudes has been demonstrated in recent research examining how representations of racial minorities—particularly Black people—influence how Black individuals are perceived in American society. Specifically, Jones (2017) asked 110 individuals to answer questions related to how they felt about the portrayal of Black characters (and Black culture) in recently watched films. Jones (2017) revealed that 71% of participants agreed that the content of recently watched films influenced their opinion of Black people and 53% agreed that the content of recently watched films helped them further develop their attitudes towards Black people. Such results help demonstrate that films have a powerful influence on viewers' perceptions—with many viewers using films to form or inform their beliefs about a racial minority group.

Because people appear to use films to inform their beliefs about racial/ethnic minority groups, it is important to understand the valence of such portrayals. If, for example, films routinely portray Black Americans (and Black culture) negatively, such portrayals will influence people's biases. To investigate the nature and valence of racial and cultural portrayals, Towbin and colleagues (2004) performed a content analysis of 26 classic Disney animated films released between 1937 and 2000. Guiding questions of the content analysis were: "How are members of marginalized cultures portrayed?;" "What is the nature of [the marginalized] character's role;" and "What behaviors do [the marginalized] characters display?" (p. 26). Of the 26 films, analyses revealed that 10 films predominantly depicted marginalized cultures negatively, 13 depicted exaggerated class stereotypes, four contained both positive and negative portrayals, and three contained positive portrayals. Additionally, the nature of the marginalized characters' roles

and behaviors in the films were predominately stereotypical. For instance, in *Mulan*, a character is portrayed with a long mustache, “slanted” eyes, and bad teeth, which reflect negative stereotypical characteristics of Chinese men (Towbin et al., 2004). Such results provide some additional evidence (albeit from classic, child-focused films) that if individuals use films to inform their attitudes toward racial/ethnic minority groups, the attitudes are likely to be negative.

Additional evidence supporting the idea that media frequently portrays racial/ethnic minority groups negatively (which can influence people’s attitudes), is derived from a study examining race-related depictions on common television networks (i.e., ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX). Specifically, Monk-Turner and others (2010) analyzed one week of shows from four top television networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX—in early March 2007. The characters in each show, on each network, were coded for various attributes, including their race and behavioral characteristics (i.e., articulate/inarticulate, quiet/loud, passive/aggressive, lazy/motivated). Across the networks, approximately 74% of the actors were White, 16% Black, 5% Latino/a, < 2% Asian, and < 3% were of another racial category. Monk-Turner and colleagues’ (2010) analyses revealed that the racial/ethnic minority actors—particularly Black and Latino/as—were more likely to portray characters with negative behavioral characteristics than the White actors. Specifically, Monk-Turner et al., revealed that the least intelligent characters portrayed were African American (18%) and Latino/a (15%) compared to (less than) 4% of White characters. Additionally, Black characters were observed to demonstrate the most negative behavioral characteristics, including being lazy, unrespectable, and provocatively dressed. Such results reveal important disparities in the quantity and quality of portrayals of racial/ethnic minority characters compared to White characters, which may inform viewer’s attitudes.

What appears clear is that the media largely portrays racial/ethnic minority individuals negatively. Although individuals report using media to form or inform their attitudes toward racial/ethnic groups—see study by Jones (2017) described previously—it is unclear whether media portrayals do, in fact, influence people's attitudes. To examine this question, Ramasubramanian (2011) examined whether media's stereotypical portrayals of racial/ethnic characters predict White people's stereotypical beliefs. White undergraduates ($N = 362$) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions where their ingroup (White characters) or their out-group (Black characters) was portrayed positively or negatively. Specifically, participants viewed pictures of several characters—either their in-group or their out-group—from different entertainment genres such as talk shows, reality shows, and sitcoms. Participants reported if they recognized the characters and rated the characters on various adjectives (e.g., lazy). Subsequently, participants completed measures assessing their stereotypical beliefs about Black people (as compared to White people). Results revealed that participants with previous exposure to negatively portrayed out-group characters were significantly more likely to stereotype Black people as lazy compared to participants exposed to positively portrayed out-group characters. Such results demonstrate that media's negative portrayal of racial/ethnic minority groups appear to influence individuals' real-world attitudes.

Given the research previously described it is important to acknowledge how various worldviews—such as the model minority myth and just world beliefs—may influence attitudes toward racial/ethnic minority groups. For example, the model minority myth reflects the belief that Asian Americans are the “most successful” minority group in terms of academic and economic power (Wong et al., 1998). Specifically, Wong and colleagues (1998) revealed that all individuals—regardless of their own self-reported race/ethnicity—endorse the model minority

myth to some degree (e.g., believing Asian Americans *do well in college* or have an increased *probability of successful careers*). However, Wong and colleagues (1998) revealed that the actual GPA and SAT scores of each racial/ethnic group in their sample did not significantly differ, ultimately not supporting the myth. Such results suggest that individuals' worldviews influence their attitudes toward racial/ethnic minority groups, which may (in part) be derived from media portrayals they are exposed to.

Extending upon prior research, the purpose of the current study is to examine how portrayals of racial/ethnic minority characters in films affect viewers' perceptions of the educational and entertainment value of the content. Although past researchers suggest that media portrayals have the power to affect individuals' attitudes, the extent to which such portrayals are perceived to be educational versus entertaining is unclear. In either case—the perceived educational versus entertaining value of films—the work has implications for individuals' beliefs about racial/ethnic minority groups. It was hypothesized that negative portrayals would be perceived as more educational and entertaining than positive portrayals, particularly for Black characters (and culture) compared to Chinese characters (and culture). If such a pattern emerges, it would support the presence of stronger societal prejudice toward Black compared to Asian people (Zebrowitz, et al., 2008).

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 108 university students (19 men, 82 women, one Transgender Woman, three Non-Binary people, three did not respond) recruited through the School of Psychology's participant pool system. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 26 years ($M = 20.44$, $SD = 1.09$), with the majority identifying as White ($n = 88$; 81.5%), followed

by Biracial/Multiracial ($n = 6$; 5.6%), Black ($n = 4$; 3.7%), Hispanic ($n = 3$; 2.8%), Asian ($n = 1$; 0.9%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ($n = 1$, 0.9%). The remaining participants selected “Prefer Not to Respond.” In exchange for participation, participants received credit to fulfill a course requirement.

Materials

Positive and Negative Racial/Cultural Representations in Film

Scenes from—two popular animated films—*The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994) and *Mulan* (Cook & Bancroft, 1998) were selected to portray African American and Chinese characters and cultures positively or negatively (i.e., two scenes for each condition for a total of eight scenes). Selection of the films (and the scenes) were based on research describing that the films contained meaningful examples of how African American and Chinese characters and cultures are portrayed positively and negatively (see Towbin et al., 2004). Specifically, the negative portrayals of African American characters in *The Lion King* included scenes related to the hyenas, which reflect stereotypes of people of color, as unintelligent, hungry, and of a lower social class. Positive portrayals of African Americans in *The Lion King* included a scene with Rafiki, who represents the wise, spiritual elder, as well as a scene with Mufasa whose kingship and guidance demonstrates positive stereotypes of African Americans and elements of African culture. From *Mulan*, the negative portrayals of Chinese characters and cultures included scenes with the Huns, who are drawn as evil Orientalist caricatures with exaggerated features. The positive portrayals in *Mulan* contained scenes of Mulan warning General Shang of the incoming Huns invasion and then being rewarded by the emperor for her actions in saving China. All scenes were between a minute and a minute and a half.

Evaluation of the Movie

The participants' evaluation of the films' educational and entertainment value was measured using adapted versions of two subscales from Ritterfeld and Jin's (2006) Movie Assessment measure. The entertainment subscale includes six items assessing the extent to which participants enjoy a film (e.g., "*The movie clips were very entertaining.*"). The educational subscale includes five items to assess individuals' attitudes toward characters and cultures depicted in films (e.g., "*The movie clips changed my perception of a community similar to Simba's [Mulan's].*"). Items on each subscale were modified to reflect the specific characters and cultures depicted in the films. Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Completely Disagree*) to 5 (*Completely Agree*). Scores for items on each subscale are averaged, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived educational or entertainment value.

Procedure

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants signed up to participate in the study via the School of Psychology's participant pool system, Sona, which directed them to an anonymous online survey in Qualtrics. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned—using features available in Qualtrics—to view either positive or negative portrayals of either African Americans in *The Lion King* or Asian Americans in *Mulan*. Prior to viewing scenes, participants read short descriptions of the relevant plot to give them context for what they would see (see Appendix). Subsequently, participants completed items assessing their perceptions of the educational and entertainment value of the film. Finally, participants reported basic demographic information, including age, gender, and race/ethnicity, were thanked, and debriefed.

Study Design and Analyses

To test the prediction that exposure to negative portrayals would be perceived as more educational and entertaining than positive portrayals, particularly for Black characters compared to Chinese characters, separate 2 (Film: *The Lion King* vs. *Mulan*) x 2 (Valence of Portrayal: Positive vs Negative) between-subjects ANOVAs were conducted. Separate ANOVAs were conducted for each dependent variable: educational and entertainment value.

Results

Perceived Educational Value

The main effect of the film was significant, revealing that participants perceived greater educational value in the movie *Mulan* ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .75$) than *The Lion King* ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.65$), $F(1, 102) = 8.36$, $p = .005$. The main effect of the valence of portrayal was also significant, revealing that participants perceived greater educational value in positive cultural portrayals ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.80$) compared to negative cultural portrayals ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .60$), $F(1, 102) = 7.74$, $p = .006$. Finally, there was a significant interaction between the film and valence of portrayal, $F(1, 102) = 4.46$, $p = .037$. Post-hoc t -tests revealed that for the movie *Mulan* (depicting Chinese characters and culture), participants perceived greater educational value for the positive cultural representations than the negative cultural representations, $t(53) = -3.30$, $p = .002$. In contrast, the post-hoc t -tests revealed that for the movie *The Lion King* (depicting Black characters and culture), participants' perceptions of the educational value of the movie did not differ for positive or negative cultural representations, $t(49) = -.61$, $p = .55$.

Perceived Entertainment Value

The main effect of the film was not significant, revealing that participants' perceptions of the entertainment value of the films *Mulan* ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .79$) and *The Lion King* ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.66$) did not differ, $F(1, 102) = .93$, $p = .34$. However, the main effect of the valence of

portrayal was significant, revealing that participants perceived greater entertainment value in positive portrayals ($M = 4.15$, $SD = .64$) compared to negative portrayals ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .71$), $F(1, 102) = 17.11$, $p < .001$. Finally, there was not a significant interaction between the film and valence of portrayal, $F(1, 102) = .03$, $p = .86$.

Discussion

The current study examined if positive and negative portrayals of racial/ethnic minority characters and their cultures—particularly Black and Chinese—affect viewers' perceptions of the educational and entertainment value of the content. Using positive and negative representations of Black characters (and Black culture) from *The Lion King* and positive and negative representations of Chinese characters (and Chinese culture) from *Mulan*, results revealed that participants reported greater *entertainment* value when portrayals were positive compared to negative (regardless of whether the films portrayed Chinese or Black characters). Additionally, results revealed that participants perceived the portrayals of Chinese characters in *Mulan* to be more *educational* when they were positive compared to negative; however, the perceived *educational* value of portrayals of Black characters in *The Lion King* did not differ whether the portrayals were positive or negative.

Participants perceived positive portrayals—regardless of the movie—as more educational and entertaining than negative portrayals. Although the finding is inconsistent with the prediction, one possible explanation for the finding may be participants' educational experiences. Given that the sample was composed of students enrolled at a Jesuit, liberal arts university, most have likely encountered and grappled with race-related information in their coursework. Because prior research has revealed that courses addressing diversity-related issues can reduce denial of modern racism, such education may make the students more wary (arguably, rejecting) of

negative stereotypical portrayals of racial/ethnic minority groups. Future researchers should replicate the current study and aim to recruit a more diverse sample—including individuals who may not have done the work to understand systemic racial issues.

The current study revealed that participants perceived the portrayals of Chinese characters in *Mulan* to be more *educational* (but not more entertaining) when they were positive compared to negative; however, the perceived *educational* value of portrayals of Black characters in *The Lion King* did not differ when the portrayals were positive or negative. This pattern of results may be, at least in part, explained by the model minority myth. Being that individuals (even highly educated individuals) may use information to confirm their stereotypes (Cox et al., 2022), participants in the current study may have found it easier (i.e., more educational) to understand the clips that confirmed their positive stereotypes of Chinese people. The model minority myth is the common belief that Asian Americans are more academically, economically, and socially successful than other racial/ethnic minority groups (Wong et al., 1998). If participants in the current study ascribe to the myth, such beliefs may explain why viewing stereotype-confirming positive portrayals of Chinese characters in *Mulan* were perceived to be more educational than negative portrayals. Although measuring individuals' endorsement of the model minority myth was beyond the scope of the current study, future researchers should examine this myth, which may help explain the study's results.

It is challenging to explain why there was no difference in the perceived educational value of positive or negative portrayals of Black characters in *The Lion King*. One possible explanation may be that the stereotypical representations of Black characters in *the Lion King* were too obvious to the participants who may have been unwilling to report their true feelings, opinions, or attitudes related to those portrayals. Past researchers have revealed that some White

people are highly motivated to avoid race-related issues (Ford et al., 2022), which might suggest that the stereotypical representations were too noticeable; therefore, differences between the positive and negative portrayals may have been obscured. Future researchers could explore how noticeable (or not) stereotypes about racial/ethnic minority groups must be for such stereotypes to affect people's attitudes.

Practical Implications

By examining positive and negative representations of racial/cultural groups in media, this study demonstrates that such representations have the power to influence the way individuals perceive racial/cultural groups. Consequently, the study has practical implications for industry—such as media creators—and individuals—such as parents. For those responsible for creating media, whether it be television or movies, results from the current study compel more accurate and diverse representations of racial/cultural groups. For those consuming media, including parents who control the media consumption of their children, results from the current study encourage more conscious choices or, at the very least, meaningful conversations about how media depicts racial/cultural groups. Ideally, results from the current study would support increased awareness and social responsibility related to minority representations in media. If media representations become more accurate, and consist of fully developed characters, individuals may be able to use such representations to meaningfully learn about those different from themselves.

Limitations and Future Research

Although there are many strengths of the current study, the limitations provide meaningful directions for future research. One of the primary limitations of the current study may be that the majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian. The limitation of having a

predominantly White/Caucasian sample is that the study fails to examine how individuals from diverse racial groups perceive (and experience) positive and negative racial/cultural representations in media. However, the predominately White sample may help uncover how this particular (majority) group perceives racial/ethnic minorities when they are depicted in media. If the dominant group is exposed to positive representations of minority groups that help them learn about others that they infrequently encounter, race relations could improve. Overall, future researchers should aim to recruit more diverse samples.

A second limitation worth noting is the use of the movie *The Lion King* to represent Black people and/or Black culture. Although there are many different racial/cultural features in the film, viewers never actually see any “Black” characters. That is, viewers see characters (i.e., hyenas) reflecting stereotypes of Black people. Therefore, it is difficult to know if viewers actually connected the characters to Black people. Future researchers should examine the extent to which individuals perceive racial/cultural cues—including stereotypes—in the film. Alternatively, future researchers could utilize films with human, rather than animal, characters.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current study examined if positive and negative portrayals of racial/ethnic minority characters and their cultures—particularly Black and Chinese—affect viewers’ perceptions of the educational and entertainment value of the content. Results revealed that participants reported greater *entertainment* value when portrayals were positive compared to negative (regardless of whether the films portrayed Chinese or Black characters). Additionally, results revealed that participants perceived the portrayals of Chinese characters in *Mulan* to be more *educational* when they were positive compared to negative; however, the perceived *educational* value of portrayals of Black characters in *The Lion King* did not differ whether the

portrayals were positive or negative. Such work adds to literature on how films may affect people's attitudes.

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Appendix

Lion King

Introduction to the Positive Racial/Cultural Representation

“Simba has just been born and is presented to the kingdom.”

“Mufasa teaches Simba, now a cub, about the duties of a king.”

Introduction to the Negative Racial/Cultural Representation

“Scar tricks Simba and Nala into exploring the elephant graveyard.”

“This scene takes place shortly after Mufasa runs the hyenas out of the elephant graveyard.”

Mulan

Introduction to the Positive Racial/Cultural Representation

“After Mulan has been expelled from the army, she comes to warn Li Shang of enemy presence in the city.”

“Mulan has successfully stopped the Huns from capturing the Emperor.”

Introduction to the Negative Racial/Cultural Representation

“The Huns army plans to travel through the Tung Shao Pass”

“The Huns army is ready for battle.”