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### White or Wrong: Minority Representation in Film and Television

The media is an effective means of communication. In an age where technology is ever-evolving, people must recognize the risks that come with it. The entertainment industry is overwhelmingly White, and as a result, minority groups are inaccurately portrayed in television and film. When minority groups are appropriately portrayed, society's understanding of that group improves, and the minority benefits. As an Asian American woman and an avid consumer of the industry, I remember growing up and never truly having a culturally significant character to look up to. There was the occasional *Mulan* and London Tipton from *Suite Life of Zack & Cody* on Disney Channel, and yet, the representation was always very surface-level and did not bring awareness to the minority struggle. Today, consumers have noticed a significant increase in diversity. Following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, major corporations such as Netflix and Hulu developed spotlights highlighting films and shows featuring minority stories. Another used initiative to strive for diversity is race-swapping--this is when media producers change a character's race or ethnicity. Race-swapping has recently become a source of controversy in the media, with many fans outraged when their favorite characters are suddenly altered. As the entertainment industry evolves and improves, race-swapping and other diversity measures will become more prevalent. Minorities representation in film and television has historically been stereotypical and unjust due to the lack of representation they receive within the entertainment

industry. In order to combat past actions, the future of the industry must not only generate diverse and inclusive content, but also incorporate diversity within its institution.

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**Key Words:** under-representation, misrepresentation, race-swapping, race-bending, self-concept, diversity, equality, inclusion (EDI)

## **HISTORY OF REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA**

It comes as no surprise that the entertainment industry has historically been dominated by White people. As a result, there is a lack of authentic depictions due to a lack of minorities in the industry. In the past, television and film were utilized "to serve the psychic purposes of those who control[led] them" (St. Claire Bourne 12). The issue with a White-dominated industry was White people's unfortunate ability to project any type of image they desired. For the Black community, images of slaves were "created and used to rationalize and reinforce their place in society" (St. Claire Bourne 12). Thus, the entertainment industry misused and leveraged its media influence to create frequently detrimental images of minority communities for their benefit. Because of these inequalities in the media, there are many instances where minority communities have had to take matters into their own hands. For instance, in 1975 the LA Rebellion group was determined to expose the irresponsibility of Hollywood's portrayals of Black people by developing films that were more bold, extravagant, and innovative than any film coming out of Hollywood studios (St. Claire Bourne 13). This was in an effort to attract White consumers to media created by Black people on *real* Black struggles. The films created by the LA Rebellion declared independence from the industry and system that used distorted images to enslave rather than liberate the Black community.

As a result of the protests, Hollywood took notice of this previously untargeted audience and attempted to capitalize on it. This was the "blaxploitation film" era, where the majority of stories presented were exploitative of the Black community. These films "took place in the Black community screen setting and featured a largely black cast" (St. Claire Bourne 14). Yet, a large percentage of the crew, writers, and directors were White. As a result, the images were created to be twisted and marketable. The villains, for example, were almost always White males, but they were still portrayed in a socially acceptable manner. Black males were portrayed as highly individualistic, hard hitting, and capable of attracting women of any race (St. Claire Bourne 15). These films appeared to be a step in the right direction: black people in the films were shown "fighting the system" and "challenging the existing order" (St. Claire Bourne 15). However, regardless of whether Black people were cast, White people had complete control over the production, including the content, speech, and actions of the Black actors, resulting in a racist portrayal. These films were subsequently used for Hollywood's own "economic, psychological, and political purposes," as they were made "palpable for the white audience" (St. Claire Bourne 15). The Black community was never taken into account when creating these films; they were made solely to entertain rather than to genuinely advocate for change.

Change was ultimately in the hands of the oppressed, leading to the formation of minority programs. These programs gave minorities the opportunity to address each other on subjects that were deemed significant at the time. St. Claire Bourne, author of "The African American Image in American Cinema," was an independent producer-director in both film and video who founded the "Black Journal" (13). The "Black Journal" was a PBS series that was claimed to have revolutionized "the treatment of the tone and images of documentaries about black issues" at the time (St. Claire Bourne 13). It is an example of minority programming and included a primarily

Black production team. While it was not mainstream, the introduction of minority programming was one of the entertainment industry's earliest forms of diversity. In the past, these were the efforts made by minority communities to provide accurate representation for their communities since the representation was so stereotypical and unjust.

## **RACE-SWAPPING**

The entertainment industry has "become more conscious of the need for greater diversity and inclusion" (Johnson and Funnel 245). Race-swapping is a step towards representation primarily focusing on employing diversity in front of the camera. It has been used in well-known franchises such as *Marvel*, which is known for rebooting a superhero or passing down the legacy of a character to someone of ethnic descent. The Human Torch, for example, was played by Chris Evans, a White actor, in the original *Fantastic Four* (2005). In its reboot in 2015, the role was given to Michael B. Jordan, a Black actor. Jordan was so vilified that he was forced to confront the internet trolls (Johnson and Funnel 246). Other franchises, such as *Disney*, are also incorporating race-swapping into their productions. It was recently used in the live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, starring Black singer and actress Halle Bailey as Ariel. Even before the trailer of the film was released, there was so much outrage that Twitter users started a #NotMyAriel campaign to express their displeasure. These are just a few examples of previously White characters being swapped, but, each time it happens there is a spark of outrage. Many argue that prejudices underlie these opinions, especially in the case of the live-action *The Little Mermaid*. According to Swanzy's opinion piece on the casting, opponents of Bailey's casting are "immature and racist," and "Ariel being White is not significant to her character" (1). The author

contends that because the film is fictional and Ariel is a mermaid, race is not as prominent or contentious in the film.

While many condemn the backlash, some acknowledge that a part of the "negative reaction is from well-intentioned, overly enthusiastic fans of the original" (Swanzy 1). While race-swapping may be done with good intentions, it does not take away from the fact that classic characters are being altered. In response to the hate Michael B. Jordan received for his role as the Human Torch, Stan Lee—the creator of the *Fantastic Four* and *Marvel Comics*—played the devil's advocate. He contended that the hatred was not motivated by "personal prejudice," rather people "hate to see any change made on a series and character they had become familiar with" (Johnson and Funnel 246). As an avid consumer of film and television, I can see how with race-swapping, sometimes it may be frustrating to see a beloved character be changed. However, I can sympathize with the need for diversity in entertainment and understand that as long as the character is not culturally relevant, then it should not be entirely problematic. In the case of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel has no type of cultural ties since that character is entirely made up and unrealistic, so it is not an issue when the character changes race.

At the root of the controversy, there are many explanations as to why people dislike race-swapping. One study discovered that political ideology may be one of the reasons. Johnson and Funnel's study sought to examine political ideology in relation to one's attitudes toward a different race playing James Bond in upcoming films. The actors who have played James Bond all have one thing in common: they are all white men, about 6 feet tall, and, with the exception of one, have dark hair. The study concluded that "conservatives are significantly less interested in seeing future James Bond films" performed by someone of "a different race than filmgoers are used to seeing" (Johnson and Funnel 251). On the other end of the spectrum, someone who is

"very liberal" has a "11 percent chance of being less interested," and for conservatives this number is "2.5 times higher" (Johnson and Funnel 252). Thus, there is a larger component to the outrage: one that originates from personal prejudice based on political ideology and beliefs.

## **DANGERS OF UNDER-REPRESENTATION**

While race-swapping primarily focuses on incorporating diversity in front of the camera, it can provide significant positive effects. Opponents overlook what the recent casting of Ariel can mean for so many children of color. Hurley claims that "identity formation in children of color travels a different path from that of children [belonging] to the dominant culture" (221). Stroman's study sought to determine whether the amount of television viewing influenced the self-concepts of Black children. According to the study, when asked how the children felt when they saw a Black person on television, "more than 80% of the sample gave answers that included the words good, happy, or great" (Stroman 90). According to the responses, Black children have very positive sentiments when seeing characters who look like them on television. This ultimately implies that children are taking in what they see through entertainment and have real and powerful reactions to such visuals.

As a result, "fairy tales [...] play an important role in shaping the self-image and belief system of children" (Hurley 221). Hurley's other study attempted to demonstrate how children are frequently mistaken about the "classic" version of fairy tales and believe that "Disney's version" is the "real story" (222). During an ethnographic study, children ages 9 to 11 were asked to draw a picture of Blanche after reading *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*—another Cinderella-type story but with a Black protagonist. Despite this, the children persisted on depicting the artwork as a White person. When questioned why they still drew Disney's

Cinderella, the children answered that the White Cinderella "was good," and that they wanted to make her pretty. According to Hurley's findings, most children "see 'White' as good, living happily ever after, and pretty" (222). Children absorb information like a sponge because of their age. So, it is unsurprising that the lack of minority characters in children's entertainment influences how children perceive themselves and the world. Change is made at home, thus it is up to parents to expose their children to the growing amount of diverse productions. Children are far too young to document their own feelings towards diversity; ultimately, parents have the responsibility to express their sentiments and the effect these films have on their children.

The negative self-concept that children can develop do not change as they grow older; in fact, they may worsen. If children were to develop a strong and confident sense of self at a young age, it can greatly "buffer ethnic minorities from negative affective costs" in the future (Schmader et. al 69). Hollywood is one of the most significant cultural exporters, yet it has long overlooked the importance of diversity. Its films have perpetuated and promoted stereotypical representations of minority communities, and it has a terrible track record of correctly reflecting diversity. The representation of individuals from minority groups have commonly been through the lens of "a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant origin" (Messaoudi 100). It may be difficult to see these injustices when one is part of the racial majority, but the entertainment business has long engaged in systemic, institutionalized racism. Studies have demonstrated that the stereotypical depiction of minorities is extremely detrimental. Schmader et al. conducted research to assess the effects of negative and stereotypical film clips on Latinos and Mexican Americans. The study was carried out by displaying two separate stereotypical clips, one comedic and the other more dramatic. It was discovered that regardless of what portrayal was shown, "Mexican Americans experience[d] negative emotional reactions, including shame, guilt, [and] anger" (Schmader et al.

68). Regardless of how accurate the portrayals were, any stereotypical depiction cued humility and guilt in adult self-identity. In a second study conducted by Schmader et al., it aimed to test European American participants on whether they feel a low self-esteem when an in-group member laughed at the stereotypical clips. It was found that “European Americans experience[d] a sense of shame and self-consciousness” when in-group members showed delight to the stereotypical clips (Schmader et al. 69). This research was conducted fairly recently; seeing European Americans understanding that laughing at these stereotypical portrayals are wrong shows how much society’s attitudes have changed towards representation.

### **FUTURE OF REPRESENTATION IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY**

Race-swapping is a valuable tool in the entertainment industry. However, it only addresses a portion of the problem. Having a diverse cast of actors is only half the battle; real change occurs behind the scenes with people in power. Fortunately, diversity initiatives have recently received increased attention. More people are realizing that because entertainment wields so much power over popular culture and public image, it has a vital obligation to reflect the American people. As of 2014, the percentage of minorities playing leading roles in films and broadcast shows edged up in recent years, with minorities filling "13 percent of lead-actor film roles" ("Diversity in Hollywood: Are Women and Minorities Treated Fairly?" 652). This figure has undoubtedly risen recently and will continue to rise as Hollywood implements new methods to increase diversity on screen and behind the cameras. Tools and measures that are implemented by the film industry must actually create systemic change rather than “appealing to diverse audiences through casting” without “fundamentally altering” business behind the camera

(Kerrigan et al. 4). The current tools and measures used are: diversity standards, incentivization, target talent development, and diversity monitoring.

Diversity standards were among the first strategies to emerge. Diversity standards are requirements that production companies must meet in order to receive funding. Most organizations must achieve "at least two of four" of the standards, which address "on-screen representation, creative leadership, industry access and training opportunities, and audience development" (Kerrigan et al. 8). ITV, a British public broadcast television network, developed a diversity guideline and announced its "Diversity Acceleration Plan" in 2020. (Kerrigan et al. 9). By expanding opportunities for marginalized groups, this guideline aimed to expedite change in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The plan has resulted in the establishment of a "Group Diversity and Inclusion Director, who sits on ITV's management board" as of 2021. (Kerrigan et al. 9). ITV is just one corporation that has advocated for the establishment of diversity guidelines; many more organizations throughout the world are following in their footsteps. In order for diversity to be authentically portrayed on screen, there must also be diversity among the leaders and business people behind the productions.

Furthermore, incentivizing film companies to adhere to diversity criteria is encouraged through awards and recognition. The "Academy Awards and the British Academy of Film and Television (BAFTA) awards system" is a recent example (Kerrigan et al. 10). The Academy Award system has created four categories in which a production must meet at least two standards in order to be considered for an award nomination. "Diversity in creative leadership and department heads" and "industry access and opportunities, including internship opportunities for underrepresented groups" are among some of the standards (Kerrigan et al. 10). These incentives are already being used by the Oscars and resulting in change, with people of color garnering the

most Oscar nominations ever in 2021. These steps are only the beginning for these award ceremonies, and there will undoubtedly be additional standards in the future that will hopefully make EDI the norm for all films.

There are also measures in talent development to promote diversity and inclusion in casting. In the United Kingdom, "ITV's Acceleration Action Plan" for 2020 emphasized "targeted recruitment, in particular delivering a positive action campaign to support under-represented candidates" (Kerrigan et al. 11). To ensure a diversified pool of candidates, they have advertised opportunities externally on a variety of platforms. In order to avoid unintended bias, they also use a number of applicant selection and assessment procedures. Furthermore, to ensure corporations are incorporating EDI "for the right reasons and not out of compulsion," there is diversity monitoring both on and off screens that gather statistical data ("Inclusion in Film" 3). One specific example of this is The Diamond Project initiative, which "examines the diversity profile of people making and appearing on television" (Kerrigan et al. 11). The initiative releases a series of reports annually to measure progress around diversity and inclusion. Diversity monitoring is especially useful in offering quantitative materials to indicate where there are gaps in EDI. Companies can then create solutions based on this data. The emergence of a wide variety of tools and measures has shown that the entertainment industry is willing to promote change and reverse its problematic past.

When I was a kid, it was rare to see a film or television show with a strong minority lead. Minorities were frequently stereotyped in some way, making us the punchline. Even when the industry attempted to incorporate representation, it was never genuine and always catered to the majority's interests. Thankfully, the industry has shifted and recognizes the importance of film

and television in society. In an age when technology is easily accessible, it is critical that the entertainment industry portrays minority groups accurately. Media consumers are becoming younger than ever before. The media has surpassed family and school as the primary means of socialization. As a result, portrayals of minority groups must be accurate and depict true struggles and characteristics. As the entertainment industry undergoes this shift—in the types of productions they create, the actors they cast, and the people in power behind the camera—future generations are certain to receive far more representation. The diversity currently represented in media is simply the beginning; just like in the past, people must continue to press for increased inclusion if real, institutionalized change is to be achieved.

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