The (Mis)Representation of People of Color in Television and Film Industries

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through research in the film industry and systemic racism, we have found a great need for change in the matter of accurate representation of people of color in the media we consume.

Stories that reflect the constructions of whiteness and Blackness are no stranger to American history, and although there has been some shift recently in society to alter the way minorities are represented across a variety of media forms, there is still a long way to go before television and film accurately reflect the lives of people of color.

We see an absence of everyday people criticizing the inaccurate and stereotypical representation of people of color in films and television. We believe that The TRiiBE, a Chicago-based digital media platform, has the opportunity to connect with college students in Chicagoland neighborhoods and call attention to this social issue that is plaguing the self-esteem of thousands of teens across the country- especially teens of color.
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INTRODUCTION

We constantly see negative media stereotypes woven throughout the media we consume on a day-to-day basis, which is demoralizing and reducing self-esteem and expectations from viewers. Additionally, we see these inequalities stemming from the lack of diversity in writer’s rooms and behind the scenes within the film industry, also known as producer bias, which can be defined as the distorted, inaccurate view presented by those responsible for media content because of their own conscious or unconscious biases and stereotypes (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011).

The problem is the general lack of and misrepresentations of people of color throughout the film and television industries. As these representations continue to be inaccurate and hurtful, people of color are taught to feel ashamed, outcasted or othered, and experience lower self-esteem and drive to be whatever they want to be (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Film industries continue to use the same white actors because those films have historically performed well and can be relied upon to make money, which lets racism continue to thrive in the country because people are continuing to see it in the media they are consuming—whether they realize it or not.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Throughout history, we have watched television shows and movies both in theaters and in our own homes that are supposed to tell stories about the lives of various people. However, the stories of people, specifically people of color and other minorities, have consistently been the same stereotypical roles that perpetuate white supremacism.

When Black characters were introduced into literature like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, they were generally written as dim-witted, fiercely loyal and white-loving characters who contributed verbally very rarely to the story. The cumulation of all of these characteristics reflected the racial roles at the time, further obscuring racism and projecting whiteness as superior (Nishi, Matias, & Montoya, 2015).

In 1978 Edward Said published his book titled, *Orientalism*, which highlighted how the West misrepresented the people of the East, often as thieves, snake charmers, exotic, and depraved (Jazeera, 2017). Said recognized how the West created the idea of the “Orient” as a means to conquer and control it, and how the important study of representation – “how the writer constructs the other” (Rustom, & Iskandar, 2010, page 57, para 4) – connects with ethnic studies.

Said recognized this ideology in 19th century western literature, and today we see it through modern culture through the news, newspapers, movies, and television that we consume. These constructions of whiteness and blackness are consistent through historical literature and art and are still projected onto society because they are expected to be. (Nishi, Matias, & Montoya, 2015). Because that is the way history has always been, and we have never learned any different.
Safiya Umoja Noble’s - *Algorithm of Oppression*

Society is becoming more dependent on search engines for information rather than libraries, which is problematic because these search engines misrepresent people, particularly people of color. Major search engine companies (Google, Microsoft, Yahoo) are making profits off of their oppressive, stereotypical algorithms (Noble, 2016).

Safiya Noble (2016) introduces the concept that popular search engine websites algorithms are providing misleading information regarding people of color. This media ecology theory directly correlates with our social concern, as up until recent years we saw an extreme lack of accurate and non-stereotypical representations of people of color in TV, film and other types of media.

However, these algorithms of oppression are not limited to search engines and search results. Many other types of media were created with oppressive and systemically racist algorithms woven through their codes. Social platforms like Twitter, for example, have been scrutinized for its image-detection algorithm that was found to be cropping out Black faces in favor of white ones (Hern, 2020). These everyday algorithmic biases largely impact teenagers, because of how much time they spend on devices. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study, “45% of teens say they are online on a near-constant basis” (Anderson, & Jiang, 2020, para 2), meaning that these teens are exposed to copious amounts of technological microaggressions. Being on the receiving end of these algorithmic biases can impose long-term psychological impacts, like sleep deprivation, poor academic performance, and altered gene expression (Epps-Darling, 2020).
Gen Z are those who are born between 1997 and 2012/15 (Kasasa, 2020). They have different beliefs, priorities, and goals than many of the other living generations today because Gen Z have grown up with technology and in a tech-driven world (Vigo, 2019).

Gen Z might be more capable and have easier access to the digital infrastructure and equipment that dominate today’s culture such as Instagram and YouTube where they primarily get their news from (Morning Consult, 2020a).

Therefore, we choose to target young women and men in the Chicagoland area, aged 18-24, who are currently attending a college or university in the city as our community. According to Pew Research Center for Social & Demographic trends, our community of Gen Z college students is more educated, diverse, liberal, and open to accepting new social trends (Parker, Graf, & Igielnik, 2019).
COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

Out target community of college students in the Chicagoland area (members of Gen Z) readily stream music and videos, have access to news, messaging, talking, video conferencing, gaming, research, creating, posting, and sharing media all at their fingertips thanks to smartphones and other devices. Because of this access, we know that we can reach our community both physically (within colleges/universities), and virtually via social media.

In order to be fluent in using digital media, community members must have access to reliable information, and be able to gauge whether or not a source of information presented to them online is credible. When evaluating and analyzing, community members must be able to identify if the representations they’re seeing are accurate depictions, or if they are stereotypical and problematic. On top of recognizing media misrepresentations and choosing not to consume the inaccurate portrayals, community members should be conscious of the overall amount of time they spend consuming media. According to the Scholars Strategy Network, researchers found that prolonged television exposure can cause a “decrease in self-esteem for all girls and for black boys, but an increase in self-esteem for white boys,” so it is imperative that they limit the amount of time they spend watching media that does not accurately represent people who look like them or other minority races (Yuen, 2019).

The barriers that prohibit our community members from seeing and exploring the opportunities to use digital media are income barriers, which might make it easier to have faster and more reliable connections in more affluent communities compared to less affluent communities, and geographical barriers which might make some members of our community lack coverage and quick internet access.
THE TRiiBE OVERVIEW

The TRiiBE is a Chicago-based digital media platform showcasing innovative content to reshape the narrative of Black Chicago through their 30 employees and contributors. Their vision statement is, “As an independent news source, we hope to unify Black Chicago in the common purpose to create a safer, more vibrant Chicago,” while their mission is to “reshape the narrative of black Chicago and give ownership back to the people” (The TRiiBE, 2020, para 1).

Those with the largest shares over the TRiiBE include Co-Founder and creative director, Morgan Elise Johnson, Co-Founder and editor in chief, Tiffany Walden, and the TRiiBE’s web developer/designer, David Elutilo (The TRiiBE, 2020). The TRiiBE was created in 2017 following the presidential election, when Johnson and Walden were enraged by the inauguration of President Trump (Spinner, 2019). According to ZoomInfo, The TRiiBE currently has a revenue of 5 million dollars, The TRiiBE’s target audience is Chicago millennials and generation z activists, who support diverse perspectives and advocate for equity.

On their site, The TRiiBE provides journalistic pieces, documentaries, creative writing pieces, and videos that are shared and streamed across their social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

The only unstated agenda that the TRiiBE may have is to gain more revenue through sponsorships, advertisements, and donors. They have these options linked out at the bottom of their website, but they do not actively post asking people to do so. The bottom line, as it is with most companies, is to make money. Looking to the future, I think it is safe to assume that the TRiiBE is hoping to expand enough that it becomes the true go-to source for black millennials and their Chicagoland-based news, further emphasizing their original goal to reflect the actual lives of those in Chicago, something that the other news outlets do not do.
There are many public opinion leaders within the film industry that care about the importance of representation. Ava DuVernay, a critically acclaimed American filmmaker for example, focuses her work on amplifying the work of people of color through her film collective, ARRAY, because they are so often not accurately represented and portrayed (Vlessing, 2020). Viola Davis, an American actress and producer, has also publicly voiced her concern in her 2015 Emmy award acceptance speech when she said, “If they exist in life, then we should see it on TV. We should see it on stage or on the screen” (Yuen, 2019, para 11). As many people are out there are as many stories that should be being told.”

On the other hand, opinion leaders that voice the counterargument mainly believe that representation is not evolving in the television and film industries because it is simply the way the world is. Former “Glee” star Amber Riley once recounted the time early in her career when a producer told her that she and other actors of color were “a little more disposable, because that’s the way the world is” (Low, 2020, para 1). Similarly, Aynne Kokas, assistant professor of media studies at the University of Virginia and author of *Hollywood Made in China*, once said in a phone interview that the film industry model, which has historically been profitable and which relies on a small number of directors and a small number of stars, is a model that keeps repeating itself with other actors and other stars that look like those same people (Bianco, 2018).

This discourse between the different thought leaders is rarely direct, as the people who do not acknowledge the lack of representation do just that: do not acknowledge the lack of representation, so there isn’t a true back and forth conversation among them. Those who believe in the importance of representation publicly state so, while those who don’t tend to be less outright with their beliefs. Instead, their stance is more likely to come out when they are exposed by
other (mainly black identifying) co-workers. Most often, it is the people who are not being accurately represented who are pushing for more and better representation in the industry. People tend to believe people when they see similarities between themselves and the thought leader, so perhaps society/non-believers won’t acknowledge the lack of representation until someone influential who they can identify with does.

It is common to see representation opinion leaders voicing their concerns publicly, like Viola Davis calling out the hypocrisy of compensating Black actors at the 2018 Women in the World event (Hines, 2020), and how Ava DuVernay often uses interviews and time on talk shows to highlight the importance of representation. Where these opinion leaders choose to have this discourse is extremely important, such as live-streamed award shows, talk shows, red carpet interviews, etc. because they have the power to reach millions of people across the country. They already have a major platform, so when that is paired with broadcasting to televisions across the nation, they can potentially influence those who had never given a second thought to the lack of representation in the films they watch. It is also extremely ironic that these opinion leaders often use their time accepting awards to criticize how the industry is not accurately representing people of color.

It seems that the public opinions of leaders in the industry and the public themselves share the same beliefs as our group: that a lack of diversity in Hollywood is a serious problem, and the only way to solve it is to break the cycle by hiring more black screenwriters, producers, directors, actors, etc. Though they do not all share quite the same level of power over public opinion, each one is incredibly important in its own right. The public can voice their concerns and boycott the films that do not reflect an accurate representation on screen and behind the scenes.
The TRiiBE sees its community as equals, which is why they try to amplify their voices. As for “propinquity,” The TRiiBE consults the community in a section called “The People, The Voices of Everyday Chicagoans” where they publish opinion pieces written by various community members such as college students and associate professors at universities (The TRiiBE, 2020). It is safe to assume that The TRiiBE is rooted in empathy, considering that they state specifically in their vision statement that their entire purpose is to “unify” Black Chicago through the publication of various works in journalism, documentary, creative writing, and video which collectively capture the community’s “multi-faceted essence” (The TRiiBE, 2020).

Through their website, we can conclude that The TRiiBE deeply cares about the community they represent, but they have not exclusively stated anywhere exactly what they promise to their readers. Although they are aiming to unify Black Chicago, The TRiiBE still showcases many diverse perspectives through their opinion forum titled “The People,” as many of the pieces are written by people representing many different backgrounds.
Our community members hold a lot of power, as Gen Z is on track to become the most well-educated generation, according to Pew Research Center (Graf, Parker, & Igielnik, 2019). Because 61% of Gen Z gets their news from social media, and the most frequently used sites being YouTube and Instagram, it is safe to assume that is where these community members hold the most power (Morning Consult, 2020a).
Many media outlets and news networks have already participated in the discourse around the topic of representation. *Huffington Post*, for example, released a detailed and extended article on the lack of diversity in writers back in 2017. Similarly, *Variety* released an entire article about how many Black actors in Hollywood have spoken out against Hollywood’s history of perpetuating white supremacy (Low, 2020). As a result, HBO admitted, “We can do better; we are doing better; we are striving to do better,” before they announced a new program called ‘HBO Access’ that seeks emerging, diverse filmmakers” (Ryan, 2017, para 18). In addition to HBO, Warner Bros has also adopted a company-wide commitment to diversity and inclusion (Fisher & Rothman, 2018).

The opinion leaders, for instance some major actors in this case, can reject roles or parts in films that are not diverse or that lack an accurate representation of all different types of people, both ultimately demanding change within the industry. We have already begun to see this from some actors, such as Michael B. Jordan who was “one of the first actors to commit to using inclusion riders, which allow actors to require diversity in the cast and crew of a film production as part of their contracts” (Fisher & Rothman, 2018, para 3).
THEORY OF CHANGE / LOGIC MODEL

Our initial assumption is that our prospective community of Chicagoland female identifying Gen Z’ers are outspoken about the change they want to make to the world they have inherited. Because Gen Z is more likely to get information from social news compared to traditional newspapers or cable news networks, we know mobile devices with WIFI access are imperative for our community (Morning Consult, 2020b). Beyond just needing a mobile device, these community members also consume media through television and various entertainment subscription platforms (Deloitte, 2020). According to a survey conducted by YUBO, about 90% of Gen Z believe in and support the Black Lives Matter movement, which leads us to believe that at least a large majority of our community participates in protesting and rallying. (Davis, 2020).

Also, some of the Chicagoland residents of the Gen Z age bracket are of college age, which means they are actively out, drinking, partying, and posting on their social media profiles.

When thinking short-term, we are hopeful that we will see more discussions about representation in films existing in existing college Black Student Union chapters, and other universities’ film clubs focusing on representation as a topic. Intermediately, we are looking for more people of color behind the camera, and in writers’ rooms. Thinking long term, we are hopeful that diversity in movies and television will be the norm, and Hollywood will be filled with actors and casts of all races and ethnicities. People of color will be represented accurately and respectfully, eliminating stereotypical roles and story lines.

To eliminate these stereotypes, more research must be done before writing the scripts and casting the roles, and notable actors can commit to using “inclusion riders” in their contracts, which guarantee a diverse and inclusive cast in projects (Fisher & Rothman, 2018). Also, Hollywood film executives hold a lot of influence over a film’s level of representation, which is
why we see a lot of the same actors across the board. There needs to be more women and other BIPOC people behind the camera, so that the representation in front of the camera is up to par (Ryan, 2017). Lastly, the government also holds a lot of influence, as it regulates what can and cannot be shown in films through censorship codes, while news sources and the media are able to praise work that is accurately represented and condemn films that are not (Hunt, 2018).
THE TRiiBE SUGGESTIONS

Considering that the Triibe has so many people on their team with various specialties, we think that onboarding journalists who focus on film to the TRiiBE’s team to publish opinion pieces regarding the representation of people of color in films would be a great way to draw attention to this social issue. In theory, this suggestion should be easily achievable, as there are many college students in the Chicagoland area who are studying film, and who might also be interested in journalism. The TRiiBE already has several correspondents for other areas, so adding a film correspondent will give them an even more solid connection with the community.

In addition to onboarding journalists specializing in film, The Triibe could include a section on their site under “The Representation,” where they can publish pieces that talk about and focus on the representation of people. This could include representation in Chicago news, how local Chicago writers form their characters, filmmakers and how they depict people in their films, artists, etc. This section could highlight both the misrepresentations in the city, but also the accurate representations by Chicago-based artists that are worth celebrating.

Lastly, a little more transparency is always helpful. The Triibe could mention in their “about” section how they are a non-biased news source and better disclose their intentions for readers. Of course, everyone has implicit biases, and The Triibe focuses on the stories of Black Chicago, but explicitly writing that they seek to tell the truth would be a great and rather simple addition to their mission statement.
COMMUNITY SUGGESTIONS

Because our community members are generally outspoken about the things they believe in, we ask that they continue to vocalize their concerns and celebrate successes. When new films and television shows come out, we ask that they analyze them and how they depict their characters of color. If they feel as though the creators have represented the community accurately, we encourage them to share it with others as an exemplary piece of media.

On the other hand, if community members feel as though a film or television show has let down a specific group of people, we ask that they use their voice and social media savvy to call out the creators/writers/producers, etc. and let them know why the piece misrepresents people. However, before they do this, we ask that our community members look into why exactly a portrayal was wrong, and/or make sure that it is truly misrepresented.

Additionally, we strongly encourage our community members to fact-check and make sure that the information that they share is from truly credible sources. Because they predominantly get their news from social media like Instagram and YouTube (Morning Consult, 2020), and the sharing aspect of information on these platforms is made incredibly easy and quick, it is imperative that community members find the source of the information they are drawn to share. A quick fact check can help stop the spread of and prevent drawing attention to fake news.

Our target audience of Gen Z college students in the Chicagoland area will benefit from these suggestions by being more educated about the experiences of other people’s lives. Both our community members and other audiences like younger Black-identifying teens will also benefit from seeing themselves represented on-screen, which can lead to higher levels of self-esteem and encourage more acceptance instead of racism/stereotypes (Martins & Harrison, 2020).
REFERENCES


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About the Project

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