

What Makes the Movie More "Colourful"? A Discussion on Diversity and Social Psychological Theories

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Abstract: Movies are one of the most widely accepted and loved forms of art, and their extremely high level of acceptance and circulation has made them a vehicle for many political and artistic ideas. The accessibility of movies also makes the narratives they convey more deeply rooted in people's minds. This is reflected not only in the educational and pedagogical functions of schools, but also in the daily impact on people's values and worldviews.

One noticeable trend about movies is that there is an increasing level of ethnic diversity in them. That is, "colourful" as the title suggests. This paper addresses this phenomenon by briefly discussing the reasons for and possible implications of this trend from a social psychological perspective based on social identity theory along with race and media studies. With reference to previous research, it may be concluded that the increased level of racial diversity among actors may be due to the fact that the profit-oriented characteristics of the movie industry compels practitioners to take into account the socially and politically influential factors of minority groups. However, as the dominant narrative is still white-dominated, the roles played by minorities in films are often influenced by stereotypes or made for specific audience groups. On top of this, some minorities, such as Asians, are subject to wider prejudice. This is reflected not only in the films themselves and casting, but also in audience preferences.

Keywords: Movie, Race, Diversity, Social identity.

1. Introduction

A movie is considered by many to be a form of media culture that teaches and entertains. This is especially true in the social, cultural and educational fields [1]. As an intuitive but predominantly fictional narrative, film connects the audience to specific social issues and social phenomena from a unique perspective. In terms of narrative tools, film is considered to be a major source of narrative and it plays an important role in shaping beliefs and attitudes [2]. From the educational point of view [3, 4], even short films can enable students to acquire knowledge quickly and impressively. And from a media and social psychology perspective, movies could have the functions to help shape and prescribe individual behaviour and public cultural understanding and knowledge acquisition.

Due to the unique function and influence of a movie and its profit-oriented purpose, the two issues of the content and audience of the movie are always present in the creation of the movie [5]. Therefore, the racial distribution of actors and audiences has become a topic of increasing concern for the film industry, audiences and politicians. This paper also focuses on this topic and critically discusses the

reasons for and possible implications of the growing trend of multiracial casting in the movies according to previous research.

2. Increasing Diversity in the Film Industry

Mainstream cinema in the United States has a long history of exclusion and negative portrayal of marginalized social groups, which includes races other than white [6]. Over the past few decades, there has been a gradual increase in the frequency of minority appearances in nightly prime time movies [7], including new entries from well-known IPs, such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Half of all the movies lacked racial diversity before the year 2010; however, this was reduced to 10% by 2020. Prior to this stage, the practice of the term: whitewashing (use of white actors in roles positioned as minorities) in the film industry was widely applied and always controversial. As examples: *Prince of Persia* (2010) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), white actors were selected to play Arabs and Asians from the original work [7, 8]. It is still happening even in recent years; movies have shown a similar trend, though less frequently. The reason whitewashing occurs is that race-based casting is common in the American movie industry, due to the fact that white audiences generally prefer films starring white actors but not others.

According to Tukachinsky and colleagues [7], it is believed that the key to increasing the racial diversity of actors is to diversify the workforce in the media industry. This could also provide the film industry with richer and more authentic minority narratives as a complement to the dominant narrative. However, generally the media industry does not have much minority participation and they are excluded from decision making positions. As a result, actors' racial diversity has not been at a significant level. This might be partly a result of media companies putting too much weight on profits, with political economy being one of the key factors they have to consider. The mainstream media has promoted ethnic diversity in the actor community to some extent in the past, as an attempt to achieve publicity and open up markets, and with the avoidance to challenge the dominant narrative. The increased ethnic diversity of today's cast is in part an attempt to cater for a niche audience, using diversity to attract viewers but attempting to maintain a close connection with the mainstream. And this trend is not only seen in the live action cast, but even in Disney's animated films there are more minority female characters, such as Mulan and Moana. However, some scholars, like Renjith [9], have argued that Disney does not pay much attention to the worldviews of the minority characters, but rather promotes the beauty and glamour of the princesses themselves.

The president of international television at Fox said that diversity programs do not sell well overseas because they do not reflect the society in which these people live: they are a reflection of American society, but they are not a reflection of all societies. She said they need to tell their units that they need to realize that creating too much diversity of protagonists in their programs may lead to problems selling their programs to the international market [10].

The media industry has taken a lot of steps in the last few years to ensure that films are inclusive and diverse enough, with studios starting to reduce whitewash, casting racial counterparts for minority roles, and casting non-white actors in traditionally white roles, such as casting blacks and Indians as elves in *The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power* (2024). Even in 2020, the Oscars committee came up with diversity criteria, and only films that met the diversity criteria could be named Best Picture [11].

However, it is a common phenomenon that films starring blacks with whites in supporting roles are generally rated about 6% lower [12]. This might suggest that the movie audience and the critic community in general, are still biased against black actors. It is not only for the roles black actors are starring in, but even for the actors themselves as well. In addition to this, they also resist the relationship that blacks play leading roles and whites play supporting ones. This argument is also supported by previous studies' findings that movie ratings are significantly more affected when both

the lead and second actors are black people and the supporting cast is white. When films starring minorities are not successful, critics even use race to explain the film's failure.

In some cases, the skin colour of the actors in a movie does affect the audience's intention to watch it, and this tendency is particularly found in romantic movies, where viewers are more likely to watch the movie if the main character is white [13]. Similar results were found in another study: white subjects were more reluctant to watch films starring actors of other races, and those audiences were less interested in the movies starring minority actors [14]. However, this preference was not evident in other areas of media outside of film, for example, video games and TV series, which may be due to the unique narrative of the film and the cost involved in watching it [8]. In addition to this, normally, many films with black protagonists have smaller budgets and were made marketable exclusively to black people, making the movies less likely to attract whites to watch them. This preference shown by audiences has led to companies increasingly segmenting audiences based on the difference of race, gradually expanding from age groups and film types to race and family types. Thus, minority actors were automatically associated with minority audiences [15].

3. Blacks in the Wave of Diversity

Firmansyah & Jones's study [16] of the movie *Black Panther* (2018) proved the significant influence of a minority race related theme; they did analyses on blacks' identity tags on social media (mainly on Twitter). The result shows a dramatically increased amount of race related tags added to African Americans' Twitter accounts, which means they have become prouder of being black once a famous and popular movie succeeds in telling a "blacks" story. Researchers believe that the more African Americans consume black media, the stronger their racial identity. This may be explained by identity theory.

Similar to the above study, Weaver and Frampton [8] similarly see social media as one of the ways to keep mainstream audiences informed about films. Film audiences often seek and share information about films through social media. One statistic found that around 40% of young viewers use social media to find out what their friends think. Twitter marketing of films also significantly influences viewers' desire to watch films [17]. This avenue of film marketing, promotion and word-of-mouth from the audience greatly influences the box office, and therefore, most commercial films go to great lengths to market and promote their films in order to satisfy the profit-making purpose of film production. With the gradual popularity of the black movement and the affirmative action movement in the United States, film studios became extra conscious of the image of blacks in films, especially in commercial films.

Like the movie *Black Panther*, *Green Book* (2018) also focuses on the black community; unlike *Black Panther*, *Green Book* directly demonstrates the discrimination of black people in society, describing the story of a black protagonist who changes the discriminatory perceptions of others through excellence in character [18]. Researchers [7-8,12,18] generally believe that white audiences are less interested in films starring minorities, partly due to the perception that these films are not relevant to them; however, this perception can change as users discuss the films in social media. White viewers were more interested in seeing a film when they saw other white people posting positive reviews of the film. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that active discussion on social media reduces social identity threat: the distinction between identity groups is emphasized, suggesting that intra-ethnic knowledge of minorities is not required to see the movie.

These successful films broke the convention of blacks playing subservient or subordinate to whites [12]. According to social identity theory, individuals strive to seek positive social identities. However, at the same time, the values that are to be identified with depend on the stereotypes associated with the group. When the group has positive stereotypes, individuals are more likely to stay in the group and recognize their membership [19]. The sense of identity brought about by the film comes from the

viewer's own sense of resemblance to the character, which is an important factor in the formation of a sense of identity, which in turn is one of the most important factors needed to appreciate the content of the film. This sense of similarity also comes from attitudes, and whether one belongs to an in-group or an out-group plays an important role in defining the social identity of group members [8,16]. In order to enhance their self-concept, people automatically make pro-group judgements or behaviour. It is worth noting that this effect of race on perceived similarity is mainly seen in the black group and less in other ethnicities, probably because of a weaker sense of racial identity.

Therefore, the target audience of a film has historically been a key concern for the film industry to consider, and when a racial advantage is given too much prominence, it is perceived that this race has a leading role in the film [20]. This perception increases in-group contact and decreases out-group contact. As a result, films starring black actors that receive wide popularity are generally marketed and promoted explicitly to audiences of all races.

4. Understated Yellow

Hawaii is famous for its multiculturalism and openness, and a study [21] conducted in Hawaii showed that the subjects did not show a clear preference when they were shown black actors and white actors. However, when they were shown Asian actors, they were found to have a clear preference for white or black actors. This outcome may be the result of unique cultural backgrounds and intergroup impressions.

When minority characters appear in films, their portrayal is often confined to narrow stereotypes and derogatory depictions are used to incorporate diversity in superficial ways, such as criticism. Generally, entertainment media is created to incorporate the creator's idea of social identity and mostly reflect the political and economic prejudices of elite social groups. The demand for diversity by mainstream audiences is often reflected in the stereotypical roles given to minorities [7]. Minority groups that do not seek to overturn stereotypes boost the self-esteem of the dominant group, yet members of disadvantaged groups often protect their self-esteem by belittling the disadvantaged group to which they belong [19].

For viewers with more racial bias, race often leads to intergroup comparisons, which can affect their perceptions of intergroup relationships in films. An actor's race can be a clue to the relevance of in-groups in a film, such as when minority actors related to out-group themes appear in the film. According to research, group-neutral roles in films are usually played by white actors [13]. The success of black films reflects the fact that mainstream audiences are likely to prefer content about minorities when certain conditions are met, such as allowing whites to temporarily extend their boundaries or engage in cultural voyeurism [8]. As an example, the success of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022).

There are times when the film can challenge the dominant narrative, but it is often laced with mild offenses to minorities, such as certain everyday expressions related to racism [2]. The dominant narrative often denigrates blacks and other minorities in order to protect the interests and status of the dominant group. Progress of particular minorities is tolerated by those in power only when it serves the interests of the dominant group. Blacks are often portrayed in the media as a violent, irrational group, but with the trend towards diversity and the popularity of the black movement, black status and stereotypes are gradually trending for the better. At the same time, however, the yellow community, which is known for its low-profile and introverted nature [22], still has a low racial status in the mainstream narrative.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discusses the current state of racial diversity in the movie industry in three parts. Firstly, a partial background and analysis of the emergence of the diversity trend. And second, some of the benefits that the black community has gained from this trend and some of the stereotypes that still remain. Last but not least, the widespread exclusion of Asians from the film industry and movie audiences and the wide-ranging impacts of the stereotypes that are still received. Analyzing this in relation to social identity theory, the increase in racial diversity in the movie industry may be a result of practitioners becoming more aware of the needs of minorities, and also the need to enrich the content of their creations, which could be improved by paying more attention to minorities in mainstream narratives. Appropriate creative and marketing approaches can accommodate the interests of multiple groups. However, some stereotypes against predominantly Asian people are still widespread.

As a brief discussion related to psychological and sociological topics, this paper also has some limitations. Firstly, a limited number of studies has been included and discussed; as a suggestion for future research, it could be more supportive and more comprehensive to conduct a meta analysis. And also, this paper was mainly focused on social identity theory, as a possible explanation for the problems mentioned. To further address those media, social and diversity questions, a more comprehensive theoretical model is needed that contains and integrates multiple perspectives, not only psychological but also sociological and political.

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