

## How Does Media Consumption Affect Racial Minority Children?

Editor Note: This topic was proposed by Jordan Hoang as a basis for pursuing a project at our Center.\* In the paper she prepared, she stated her concern as follows:

“Media is saturated with people of the same racial background, specifically those of a Eurocentric heritage. It is very rare that other minority groups are depicted as a main or lead character. When they are given representation however, they are often displayed controversially with stereotypes and harmful characteristics. If minority children are constantly surrounded by this form of media, it can have significant negative effects on their ethnic racial identity as well as their perceptions of themselves. In addition, it can harm how they are perceived by their Caucasian peers by building these inaccurate characteristics about POC (people of color) groups.” Jordan Hoang

Child and adolescent consumption of media in recent years has increased exponentially. The average time youngsters spend with media is estimated as 7-11 hours a day (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012). On the positive side, media contributes to many desired educational and social outcomes. On the negative side, media use is associated with increased violent behavior, exposure to inappropriate sexual content, and problems such as depression, obesity and sleep deprivation.

And there is the matter of the institutionalized racism and sexism that permeates media content. “Minority” racial and gender groups have long been underrepresented and, when present, too often continue to be portrayed in ways that perpetuate negative stereotypes.

This brief resource highlights the problem and suggests ways for schools to play a role in countering it.

### About the Problem

While TV and magazines are responsible for some of the negative outcomes, it is the internet that has become the source of most concern. Children and teenagers have the ability to "download violent videos, send sexual text messages or explicit photographs to their friends, buy cigarettes and beer on the Internet, and post enticing profiles" (Singh, 2020). They can perpetrate and experience cyberbullying and manifest other distressing behaviors. They are exposed to content that can distort emotional and psychological development and endanger well-being.

With specific respect to racial concerns, a study on cyberbullying found that an alarming 10% to 20% of their sample were cyberbullied based on their racial background. Such racially motivated bullying is related to insecurities about one's race and self-loathing (Hamm, et.al, 2015).

More broadly, while minority representation in media has increased, negative and stereotypical images often are perpetuated (Greenburg, 1988; Greenberg & Mastro, 2011; Schlote & Otremba, 2010). For instance, minorities continue to be characterized as criminals and depicted as inarticulate and uncultured.

### **Stereotypical Roles and Harmful Generalizations**

Categorizations are groupings we create about people; stereotypes are defined as large generalizations made for a group which ignore individual characteristics. Both are crucial in identity development. Children often associate with the roles they see on the screen, especially when the persons portrayed have similar phenotypic characteristics to them (Trebbe, et al, 2017). These perceptions play a role in forming social and ethnic identities.

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\*The material in this document builds on work done by Jordan Hoang as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2022.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Creating generalizations often causes group stereotyping of minority and marginalized individuals. And too often the stereotypes are negative and depict some groups as more negative or inferior than others.

As of 2020-2021, there has been an overall rise in diversity (e.g., 34.9% of broadcast, 35.8% of cable, 30.7% of digital featured majority-minority casts). However, most of the main character roles still are represented by white actors (Ramón, Tran, & Hunt, 2022). “People of color are often stereotyped or, in some cases, absent altogether. For example, despite being 18% of the population, Latinos only make up 5% of speaking film roles. Meanwhile White people, who make up only 60% of the population, occupy 76% of lead roles on both streaming and network TV shows” (Rogers, Mastro, Robb, & Peebles, 2021). Asians, Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Muslims, Arabs, gender minorities, etc. all are under-represented.

### **A Sampling from the Literature on How Media Consumption Affects Racial Minority Children**

From: *The Inclusion Imperative: Why Media Representation Matters for Kids' Ethnic-Racial Development*. by Rogers, Mastro, Robb, & Peebles (2021).

>Rogers and colleagues report that “screen media continues to fall short in its portrayal of diverse races and ethnicities. People of color are underrepresented in movie and TV roles, and when they are represented, they're often stereotyped. Meanwhile, parents and caregivers have reported that they want to use media as a tool to help kids not just see themselves reflected back, but also to inspire acceptance and inclusion in general.”...

More specifically, they note that “exposure to negative and narrow media representations of ethnic-racial groups can contribute to the development of stereotypes, prompt bias, encourage prejudice and discrimination, and even undermine how people feel about themselves and their own ethnic-racial group. Alternatively, seeing constructive depictions of ethnic-racial groups may reduce stereotyping and encourage more favorable interracial and interethnic relations.”

“... For children, media representations may be particularly meaningful as they look to cues in their social environment to develop and shape their understanding of ethnic-racial groups. Unfortunately, the research on ethnic-racial representations in children's media is limited, as is our understanding of when, what, and how children learn about ethnicity-race from the media. However, we know that children consume and engage with media regularly (Rideout & Robb, 2019; Rideout & Robb, 2020) and that children can (and do) learn many concepts from the media, from numbers and letters to empathy and science, that influence their behaviors and knowledge about the real world (Aladé & Nathanson, 2016; Lauricella et al., 2011; Richards & Calvert, 2017).”

>A general concern raised in the literature is that racial stereotypes made in the media can negatively influence policies and practices affecting people of color (e.g., related to health, immigration status, affirmative action). Relatedly, Trebbe and colleagues (2017) note findings indicating that heavy media exposure given to stereotypical portrayals of Latinos is associated with widespread beliefs that the representations accurately reflect Latinos in real life; the authors stress that this can have polarizing and prejudicial effects on behavior.

>An article from a high school newspaper featured student views of minority representation in media (Basnet, 2021). One student commented that “The lack of representation has impacted me so much. ... Many shows and movies try to be more inclusive, but ... they incorporate a white savior complex, which makes it a conflict for the POC [people of color] community.” The interviewed students believe such portrayals contribute to internalization of feelings that their racial identity is not desirable or attractive and that they are inferior to whites.

## Implications for Schools

Although children are born with unbiased innocence, the environment they are born into begins to frame their world-view, from the people they live with to the people they see only on screen. The characters and storylines that children grow up viewing take part in building their perspective of themselves and of others. Therefore, the marginalization of people of color in the media leads viewers to believe that whiteness is equivalent to normalcy, which can cause children of color to struggle with their identity or communities. Quetzali Lopez

Schools can play a major role in countering the negative impact of media. And they need to do so if they are to maximize efforts to reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps, facilitate positive social and emotional development, and produce racial harmony at school.

Recommendations for schools in the media literature emphasize

- including a focus on teaching media literacy in a comprehensive and inclusive way
- using media that not only is inclusive, but presents authentic representations
- curtailing cyberbullying
- fostering mutual respect in interpersonal transactions at school.

All of these efforts can be bolstered as schools outreach to inform parents about helping their youngsters do well at school. Available evidence indicates that parents are especially anxious to learn more about how to effectively interact with their youngsters to minimize the negative impact of media consumption (Besana, Katsiaficas, & Loyd, 2020; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015).

Beyond the above efforts, schools need to provide a system of student/learning supports for those who require help in recovering positive feelings about self and others. (Adelman & Taylor, 2020).

Also, realistically, efforts at schools to counter the negative impact of media require a focus on dealing with racial, gender, and other negative biases that may have been deeply internalized by students, their families, school staff, and district administrators, and board members.

## Concluding Comments

We recognize the immensity of the problem. We also recognize that it is a highly charged political, economic, and societal problem.

Nevertheless, schools must play a major role in addressing the negative effects of student media consumption and in capitalizing on the opportunities media provides for facilitating the school's mission to educate all students.

As James P. Steyer, founder and CEO of the organization *Common Sense* eloquently notes:

Media plays a critical role in shaping how we understand and make sense of ourselves, our identities, and the world around us. It can perpetuate stereotypes and biases, exacerbating injustice and inequities. But it also presents an opportunity to reduce bias, end division, and be a gateway to a more inclusive future.

Given the prominence of media in the development and lives of children and adolescents, it is daunting to think about how limited the research focus has been. For instance, there is pressing need to increase understanding of the impact of social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. In particular, significant concerns have been raised about the types of interactions and the nature of the user-generated media content.

**Clearly, it is time to do more.**

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For more, see the

**>Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI)**; focuses on media with an equity and social justice emphasis.

**>Media Awareness Network: For Educators**

Also, our Center has a Quick Find on the

**>Effects of Mass Media on Behavior**