

# The Influence of Racial Depictions in Children's Media on Child Development

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***Abstract***

Although children are born with unbiased innocence, the environment they are born into begins to frame their worldview, 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. My research examines how children perceive who should be the protagonists and antagonists, solely based on visual features, to study the correlation and patterns their choices have with the media they consume. With this study, I intend to gain insight into how viewers as well as content creators can recognize and acknowledge the racial messaging encoded in the media.

## ***Introduction***

Practically everyone can recall how their favorite movie or show from their childhood affected them. From stories about princesses to iron giants, children's media develops iconic staples, and impacts society for generations. Yet despite how ingrained it remains in society, children's media is seldomly considered to be serious material (Brown 2). The dismissal of children's film and television as juvenile, ignores the influence media has on children even at a subconscious level. A significant factor in cultivating young minds is how children perceive the concept of race. In recent years, diversity among casts and characters has been promoted and encouraged, yet children's media continues to bypass addressing social issues in an attempt to remain neutral and maintain "family values" (Gillota 105). Racial depictions have evolved into romanticized stereotypes, or as token characters thrown in for the diversity factor. These mechanisms perpetuate white institutional power by enforcing white narratives (Kee 68). Nevertheless, there are still films and television shows that work towards providing positive racial representations to young audiences, which can serve to both educate viewers, as well as boost the self-image for children of color. My research explores how the media that children are exposed to can affect their world view and perception of other people.

## ***How Children Perceive Race Through Media***

Children are capable of perceiving different races as early as birth, especially when growing up surrounded by the influence of the media. By the age of four, children are able to distinguish different physical features between races, and by ten, they are already grasping abstract traits and attributes among racial groups (Greenberg and Mastro 75). However, kids who are completely immersed in surroundings in which white supremacy is normalized begin internalizing these racial prejudices from birth (Cole and Verwayne 35). Thus, aside from only learning about race,

children also need to unlearn the racism that they have been absorbing from certain toxic environments (Cole and Verwayne 35). Movies and television are one of children's first windows to the outside world. In fact, studies have concluded that children are unable to discriminate between television and the real world until they are about three or four years old (Kirkorian 42). The recurring images that children view of different ethnic groups instill preconceptions about the society.

Although children's movies and television tend to be fictional, the worlds and stories audiences view begin to influence their attitudes and beliefs of reality. Therefore, when people of color are consistently portrayed as the villain or the aid to the white hero, children begin to perceive these typecast roles to be true in real life. Cultivation theory poses that the media has long-term effects on audiences' perceptions of reality, despite the inaccuracy (Gladkova 139). Research has shown that heavy television viewers (people who watch four or more hours a day), acquire an inaccurate perception of social reality, are drawn to mainstream opinions, and show intolerance to different points of view (Gladkova 139). The expectations children draw from the media's misrepresentation of the real world will eventually influence their actions and decision making. Of course, the amount of media consumption per individual varies, so the influence of the media will vary accordingly as well.

From a cultivation perspective, there are two outcomes that develop through the levels which media is absorbed and comprehended. First-order outcomes are derived from concrete, observable features in the media, such as appearances and demographics, while second-order outcomes are drawn from implied characteristics and patterns, such as behavioral stereotypes (Greenberg and Mastro 77). However, cultivation theory does not always consider the few dynamic and progressive portrayals of racial groups whose influence can surpass the impact of

poorer representations (Greenberg and Mastro 77). Still, children can also receive mixed messages from how race and ethnicity is portrayed on screen. For example, there can be a dignified, admirable character of color on screen, but whose culture is watered down in the storyline for comic relief. Thus, both positive and negative portrayals of race and culture simultaneously (Towbin et al. 37). Children who grew up viewing more compelling stories and character types versus problematic stereotypes will consequentially have a more openminded view about other races in comparison to children who were exposed to negative racial depictions or lacked diversity in their media consumption at all.

### ***How Children Perceive Themselves Through Media***

Aside from how the media shapes how children perceive other races, film and television also carries a lot of weight in the construction of children's own self-image as well. Regardless of age, studies show that audiences favor shows and movies that contain their own race or ethnicity (Greenberg and Mastro 75). However, children of color have limited options of being reflected on screen, because the media still portrays the white-middle class family as the universal experience (Roberts 137). In turn, children of color then perceive their own experiences as insignificant or non-existent, which negatively affects their self-esteem.

When characters of color are present but only represented as side characters for the white protagonist, children receive the subliminal message that "white is right," because white characters are praised as the hero children want to emulate (Roberts 136). The consistent emphasis that white is equivalent to normalcy further leads children of color to struggle with their own appearance and identity (Aldama and Gonzalez 114). Just the number of times a race or ethnic group appears in movies and shows reveals to viewers how valued that group is to society as a whole (Greenberg and Mastro 78). Aside from solely visual elements, how

characters sound also play a role in how children perceive them. Non-American accents on white or anthropomorphic characters, is also a common trope used on villains (Dobrow et al.). Social identity theory states that individuals form their identity through comparing the positive characteristics of their ingroup to negative characteristics of certain outgroups (Greenberg and Mastro 77). Media portrayals further prompt these comparisons, thus further promoting the concept of the “other.”

### ***Methods***

In researching how the media has placed a racial norm for children, I will conduct a study on children within the ages of first through eighth grade, where they will be individually be presented in a scenario where they must cast a fictitious film. First, their families will be surveyed with questions about their ethnic background and asked what programs or movies their child frequently watches at home. Then, each child will be shown eight stock images of children, four boys and four girls, varying in skin tone and facial features. The children in the photographs must vary from light to dark skin complexions, regardless of ethnic background, due to the complexities and overlap between racial and ethnic categories. The child will then be told that these “actors” will be together in a movie, and to identify who should play which role: The protagonist, the antagonist, and the sidekicks. For children too young to know these words, they will simply be asked to identify which characters are the “good” and “bad” guys and who are their friends. No information about the character’s names or ethnicities will be disclosed to the children. Once they have made their selections, they will be asked to elaborate why they chose which photo. The responses will be video recorded for reference, with the consent of the child’s guardians.

### ***Expected Results***

Due to the consistent racial messages embedded in the media, I expect the results to parallel what children are already conditioned to believe is normal, which would be based on both their homelife and the media they are already consuming. Therefore, the results will correlate with the information provided in the survey. Once I collect all of the footage from my participants, I will categorize their responses and look for patterns in the types of media they consume in their stories and tropes. I expect that the “white is right” complex will likely be prevalent in the results when selecting among the eight faces to cast as good or bad characters, since majority of media in general has white protagonists with characters of color as token side characters or villains (Clark). The session will be recorded in order to document the language that the children use when describing or explaining their choices for the character roles. As well as collecting the statistics that result from the test, I would also like to examine the children’s word choice and reasoning to gain insight on any preexisting biases or preferences they may subconsciously have.

### ***Conclusion***

Media is a tool that shapes children’s minds their entire lives. Recognizing how race is portrayed and absorbed from the media allows audiences to educate themselves on social biases. Problematic racial depictions still coexist alongside the wholesome, emotional messages that audiences are attached to in children’s film and television. However, instead of ignoring the underlying social issues or condemning the beloved films and shows overall, people need to learn how to address the embedded racial messages, so they are not repeated and transmitted to the next generation.

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***Budget***

My budget consists primarily of participation compensation along with some equipment costs. I plan on having thirty child participants, with a compensation of fifty dollars per family. The images I will be using for the study will be a set of eight stock photos, which must be consistent in pose, background, and clothing, and would cost approximately twenty dollars per image. The surveys that would be sent to the families should cost no more than five dollars per survey. Finally, since I intend on recording each child's response, I would need one-hundred dollars to purchase SD cards to store all of the footage. My total budget then totals to \$1,910.