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Analyzing misrepresentation of races in Netflix Original films using Critical Race Theory and Social Identity Theory

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Analyzing Misrepresentation of Races in Netflix Original Films Using Critical Race
Theory and Social Identity Theory

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A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri –
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Arts in Communication.

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ABSTRACT

In a society like today's, racial misrepresentation can be found across a vast number of different forms of media. Racial misrepresentation has been found in television portrayals of characters within series and programs during primetime television. This sort of misrepresentation creates obstacles for certain minorities to overcome prejudice, racism, and bigotry that oppresses their ingroup. A content analysis of 20 Netflix Original films which were chosen through random purposive sampling, to include comedy and drama genres, was conducted for the research. The analysis produced results that helped explain that Netflix's representation of minorities through inclusion has improved for Blacks, yet still needed improvement for Hispanics, Asians, and Middle Eastern. The analysis also suggested that Netflix was not misrepresenting minorities through portrayal or the demographics of the Original's character. An important takeaway from the analysis was that although Netflix's representation of Blacks has improved, there is a lack in equal representation across Black and Whites together within the same film, meaning one of the race's was represented more throughout the film, rather than being equal.

KEYWORDS: Race, Content Analysis, misrepresentation, media, streaming service, social identity, critical race theory, groups, Netflix Original movies, Netflix

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I am wholeheartedly appreciative and thankful for my grandparents for their constant encouragement to chase my dreams and their belief in me to finish strong. I am also very thankful for my parents and siblings for their unconditional love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A quite common issue that seems to resurface throughout history, if it even disappeared for that matter, is racial prejudice and discrimination. Throughout history, American society has been known to hold onto racism and keep it at its core. Some factors include self-categorization, factions encouraging the idea of such bigotry or behavior using intergroup loyalty and pride, as well as segregation (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020).

The remaining four factors the researchers argue contribute to American racism include: *hierarchy*, which emboldens people to think, feel and behave in racist ways; *power*, which legislates racism on both micro and macro levels; *media*, which legitimizes overrepresented and idealized representations of White Americans while marginalizing and minimizing people of color; and *passivism*, such that overlooking or denying the existence of racism encourages others to do the same. In short, they argue that the U.S. positions and empowers some over others, reinforces those differences through biased media, and then leaves those disparities and media in place (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020).

In a sense, people can take on the role of instigation, a form of “gas-lighting”, and spark the epidemic throughout the course of history. But what exactly “gas-lights” the idea or principle of racism? There must be something that can explain why certain classes of people, races to be exact, judge and criticize other races for reasons that are hard to even grasp. These communicators then tend to act upon perceptions that are acquired from past experiences or situational circumstances. These perceptions, then, can consist of characteristics or factors that can be applied to people’s lives. Such characteristics can be financial status, level of education, race, etc. One of the biggest characteristics that many tend to use as a basis of judgement on one’s character is race, and one of the biggest culprits is the media. Many races and ethnicities have noticed the misrepresentation in the streaming services, and very few scholars have done studies on the services doing so. For example, Apple TV Plus misrepresented Muslim women in a movie they released named *Hala*. The plot is based around the idea of a trapped woman who felt oppressed and was obligated to stay bound to her religion’s laws and her parents’ demands. This was also the case for Netflix’s Spanish show *Elite* (Beg, 2019). To further explain the misrepresentation,

The media portrays Muslim women as oppressed and Muslim men as terrorists. Hollywood loves to use Muslims as the evil enemy and violent terrorist, but we have rarely been depicted in a way that depicts the majority. Producers perpetuate the same trope. It is dangerous and harmful to the community it represents. When Muslims are depicted as individuals who hate their religion and

want to distance themselves from their identity, it contributes to America's vilification of Islam. Uneducated entertainment creators use this typecast to perpetuate a negative portrayal of Islam in this country. This allows people to harm Muslims, believing that negative portrayal (Beg, 2019).

This study focuses on discovering the amount of misrepresentation found on the streaming services, as well as how many races are affected. This study aims to achieve said goal with the use of Netflix as the streaming service of choice specifically analyzing the original works of Netflix to compare the findings to James Corfield's analysis in 2017. This will help determine whether largely known streaming services such as Netflix are making initiatives to reduce or extinguish misrepresentation found within streaming services' original works.

Netflix has become a high-end profitable streaming service in many parts of the world. When it comes to financial stability and profit margin, Netflix does quite well, with their operating margin surging to 16.8% in the first quarter of this year, putting it in league with highly profitable cloud services and legacy tech companies, marking below the company's forecast of an 18% margin (Bowman, 2020). It has risen to success, "By creating compelling original programming, analyzing its user data to serve subscribers better, and above all by letting people consume content in the ways they prefer" (Investopedia, 2020, paragraph number). "Netflix disrupted the television industry and forced cable companies to change the way they do business" (Investopedia, 2020, paragraph number). Even with their financial successes, it does not make Netflix 100%

perfect. Netflix has caught the tailwinds of negativity and skepticism regarding how they portray their characters in their Original films and series. Studies have examined the content of the Originals but focused on Original series potentially limiting the research and possible connections to other variables that could play a significant role in misrepresentation. Although it seems like Netflix misrepresents certain races in their Originals, there has been only one study that has investigated how Netflix portrays certain demographics. That study was a content analysis that examines how prime-time television and Netflix original programming represent and portray ethnicity, age, occupation, criminality, gender and sexuality (Corfield, 2017). These findings, which provide evidence for misrepresentation, serve as a basis for further study. The findings include the alarming percentages of Blacks to be represented as criminals in Netflix Drama and Crime television series. Another level of misrepresentation was the low number of TV series that included the characters who were Latino, Native American, and Middle Eastern (Corfield, 2017). Over the last three years, Netflix has made great strides to become more global, expanding their service into more and more countries - 130 territories to be exact. Recently, Netflix has also curated a new collection of “Black Lives Matter” titles in light of the racial oppression and police brutality seen in America (Ali, 2020). Netflix went onto say that Black Lives not only matter, but Black storytelling matters. With Blacks being a minority, this shows a possible shift in how Netflix wants to represent minorities in a fair manner, giving them the opportunity to voice their opinions and be heard. To do this, collected research and analysis will be applied to both the social identity theory and critical race theory, which will be the framework for research. This situation is important in the world’s society not only because streaming services are

becoming one of the largest and most used forms of television and film consumption, but also because

streaming services are challenging the temporality or windowing of televisual content and challenging different industrial models of distribution. This is substantial because the exclusive streaming of a series not only has shifted industry logics and practices but also has resulted in different textual programming and audience reception practices meant to control the market (Burroughs, 2018, p. 8).

If the collected research can shed light on a reduction of misrepresentation of races on Netflix, a possible attitudinal shift or better yet, a societal movement, would be created, reducing prejudice, racism, and bigotry in the media. This leads the research towards the beginning framework of its core literature.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory suggests that the groups to which a person belongs contain characteristics that create a member's self-concept by providing the expected attitudes and behaviors connected with the membership. Group involvements defined by clear differences between groups are most observable, which can cause distinctions to be made based on their characteristics (Mastro, 2003). SIT is commonly relevant in monitoring conflicts. "The possibility that individuals' expectations about race relations are dominated by perceived conflict might influence how representations of inter-racial relationships are viewed" (Coover, 2001, p. 427). The premises of SIT help explain contributors to racial antipathy, which can, in turn, lead to conflicts. Furthermore,

racial antipathy persists due to (a) cultural and ideological differences between majority and minority group members (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), which are often reflected in media representations of race/ethnicity (Ramírez Berg, 2002), (b) cognitive processes that give rise to racial stereotyping (Brewer, 1979; Hamilton, 1981), and (c) social identity motivations that lead to intergroup comparisons. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 2).

SIT claims that individuals categorize themselves as belonging to relevant in-groups, which bring together individuals with common characteristics, and distinguish themselves from other individuals who belong to out-groups; in addition, individuals tend to view their in-groups more favorably than their out-groups. Dana Mastro, a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, discusses how SIT ties in with self-concept and group membership in her study regarding media use associated with race-based policies:

Consequently, when a particular social identity is salient, an individual's unique features are considered to a lesser degree. Thus, when a person is characterized as a group member, individual self-perception is transformed into a collective self-concept, convergent with in-group members and divergent with out-group members (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Turner, 1985, 1987). (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006, p. 309)

One study used SIT as researchers analyzed semi-structured interviews on health care professionals' experiences of conflicts to explore the interaction between group processes and conflicts, as well as the consequences of these conflicts on professionals. Through this analysis, they aimed to identify possible educational strategies to overcome boundaries between different groups. This information supports the claim that groups and races of people tend to stereotype others.

SIT has been tested specifically using a content analysis formulated and driven by a remarkably similar purpose as my study (Corfield, 2017). It has been supported by many empirical studies through other facets of communication and different methods such as surveys, experiments and meta-analyses. One three-part study gave insight on how surveys were also used in different studies when trying to determine SIT and how different college students treated one another (Trepte, Sabine, & Krämer, 2007). The study was conducted three times in three different countries. Throughout the studies, they were able to derive a two-way process model of SIT in media effects. Lo and behold, the process of social comparison was amended with a much simpler process of searching for similarities. From hearing the results of this study, SIT was chosen as a basis for many social identity circumstances and social comparison acts or relations.

The implications of SIT to the study of the impact of the media on perceptions of in group and outgroup members suggest that television may provide the necessary elements for cognitive self-evaluation based on the message. Thus, television content may initiate the cognitive process of intergroup competition when the valued dimension in question is race/ethnicity. Because when viewing television few distinguishing features /categories are present or accessible, except race, judgments will likely be made based upon that dimension as a result of its presence (Abrams, 1999). Therefore, persons are likely to rely heavily upon racial stereotypes in the decision-making process when race/ethnicity is

the singularly distinctive means of comparison (Mastro, 2003, p. 101).

Mastro (2003), gaining research from her two-study experimental design discovered that negatively stereotypical racial depictions in mediated messages were associated with social judgments. To further explain, race and ethnicity are strong, visual characteristics that are prominently present in modern television, as well as content from streaming services, and because these characteristics of a cast member from a selected film or series are easily seen as dimensions that may compete with a viewer's ingroup, social comparisons and stereotypes are then generated. Since it is evident that television can act as a supporting role in how people see other races and ethnicities, viewers can racially stereotype based on how the character is portrayed in the film or series. SIT can then help explain why viewers wrongfully stereotype said race, as well as help researchers understand that because of the production staff's self-categorization and self-concept, they chose to misrepresent said race, whether intentionally or not. After obtaining such knowledge regarding past studies, it appears that SIT helps explain that individuals self-identify as members of their ingroup based on characteristics and behaviors that are commonly seen within those groups. It also suggests that members of classified groups get self-esteem from those groups that they belong to. This challenges realist theories because it proposes that group membership is sufficient to formulate prejudice, without the need for competition over resources. Because of this sense of belonging to a group, the members of the group then take on a form of pride and esteem,

where the in-group (us) and out-group (them) comes into play. A two-part study by Kraus and Park (2014), suggested that the general social standing of the group which would be derived from the combination of social class, family, and sport's teams in which the members of the group belonged to, were the real sources of pride and self-esteem, that would play a large role in the social identification of races and the people within them. Since this was clearly connected, this same proposition and source of information can be used to help explain why misrepresentation can be found within Netflix Originals, simply being that members opposite of the social class of the director of said Original, may be seen differently to him or her, which would then influence the director's perception of how the character should act within the Original. This explanation can also be a reason for what is known as "Whiteness", a common term associated with Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory

Many scholars had the same reoccurring question of "why?" They wanted to know why certain prejudices were prevalent. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was pioneered in the mid- 1970s, by Mr. Derrick Bell, a professor at the New York University School of Law. Mr. Bell and a group of colleagues saw how people were being mistreated and saw the need for change. Scholars alongside Bell were Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, Camara Phyllis Jones, Mari Matsuda, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw. Not mindful of how people saw him or what they said about him, Bell and his colleagues kept moving forward toward progress and the conception of CRT.

Bell and this group of lawyers teamed up to introduce an answer that could help the public understand why certain races tend to judge and reflect on one another so harshly, and why they form prejudices on one's culture or ways of life. This answer was

molded and guided by the theoretical framework of what is now officially established as the CRT, giving insight to racial miscues, while it “examines differences related to bias, prejudice, and discrimination” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2014, p. 419).

To begin, the CRT, aims to explain the overall conceived notion that racism is justified, or quite frankly, is invisible to those of the majority (Whites). CRT goes on to explain that most people, “see racism as ordinary, common, or normal—it is “the usual way society does business.”” (Littlejohn et al., 2014, pg. 419). With this notion, it is often difficult to address the epidemic because it appears normal or ordinary. Meaning, that if various instances of prejudice or discrimination happen often, they are more inclined to go unnoticed, both for the commonwealth of the general public, and the law itself. A second agreement that scholars decided upon was that White dominance in the United States serves as the general paperwork or blueprints to the psychological and materialistic advantage of distinct dominant classes of people, such as races. This means that there are few people that are interested in eradicating racism. This in a sense sheds light on how what is seen as “normal”, is really a reinforced, constructed bias towards White culture, and certain groups of people will only support various different anti-racism programs or movements, only if said program can be beneficial to their group of people. Basically, the overall understanding of CRT can be originated from the discovered fact that “Whiteness” is a true concept or realization today, being that Whiteness is constructed of six different moving parts. The six different moving parts are the facts that White is equated by power regarding status, being the majority, and asserting dominance. Being White is a default position, as well as a scientific classification without social status or titles. Being White means being of a natural origin, obtaining the ability to label oneself

as any racialized category, and lastly, White is based on European ancestry (Littlejohn et al., 2014).

In a study that focused on whether or not there was a presence of legitimate Whiteness within the various different teacher education programs across the nation, several researchers found that there was indeed a “Whiteness” aspect when it came to how different White teachers were supposed to be equipped with the information necessary to offer students of racial or ethnical diversity, when really they did not hold any accreditation to do so. Because of this, they discovered that there was a continued production of untrained and unequipped teachers, in terms of linguistics, racial circumstances, and ethnical properties of different areas in life. Upon discovery, they claim that this is not done out of abnormality, but rather, it is a product of racist systems designed to meet White needs, (Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, & Mayfield, 2013). They discovered these findings by researching the noticeable gap between what teacher education programs are reporting is happening and the continuous production of White teachers who do not possess the qualities to offer and support racially diverse students in their culturally responsive education.

Three tenets seem to guide the study, “The tenet of interest convergence asks how White interests are served through incremental steps. The tenet of color blindness prompts asking how structures that seem neutral, such as teacher testing, reinforce Whiteness and White interests. The tenet of experiential knowledge prompts asking whose voices are being heard... (&) argues that much about teacher education can be changed, offering suggestions that derive from these tenets” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 155). Overall, they ended up finding that “Using the tenets of interest convergence, the myth of

neutrality and color blindness, and experiential knowledge...Whiteness is deeply embedded in systems of teacher education” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 165).

From this study alone, it shows how there are different institutions that clearly use racism as a way of living and a way of natural life. Different institutions use racism as a system and how they do things as well as how they maneuver and make ends meet. Although it may not be right ethically or even morally sound, the CRT is well supported in the sense that racism is a way of life in today’s society, and it has been instilled by the common belief and assumption that Whites are the dominant and most acclaimed race in terms of historical context, societal views, and other underlying factors.

CRT claims that White supremacy and racial issues have been maintained over time, and law and media are factors that promote this. CRT explains that racism is an ordinary fact of American life (Wood, 2006). Much of the critical edge in critical race studies is provided by various perspectives. These perspectives include social norms, economics, feminism, culture, politics and legality issues. A study had been conducted by observing how television portrays certain races. They discovered that television is known to portray the African American male as angry, potentially violent, and sexually aggressive, “In their study of television commercial content, Coltraine and Messineo (2000) concluded that the main message provided about African American males is that they were aggressive and the main message provided about African American females is that they were inconsequential” (Klein & Shiffman, 2006, p. 162). This shows how media misrepresents Black people overall. With Whiteness being a main ingredient in CRT and racism overall, it can inform how/why Netflix misrepresents people of specific races in their Originals. This brings to light that Netflix is misrepresenting certain races and

adapting to the Whiteness stigma without meaning to. This could also fall in line with the concept of self-categorization, where members of groups can categorize themselves into their group and take on the stigma or stereotype of that group, because society reinforces that stigma, and minorities such as Blacks, react by not upholding the American values (education, financial stability, etc.), which are a core segment of the traditional White view of America. This stems from a symbolic race theory,

“which proposes that negative attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities result from perceptions that minority groups violate core American values. From this perspective, minorities are evaluated in terms of the extent to which they go against the prototypical characteristics of the in-group (i.e., mainstream, White America)” (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006, p. 320).

Studies have been conducted by observing how television portrays certain races. In a study conducted by Mastro and Kopacz, they found that television portrayals of certain minorities would lead to later judgements by Whites, “similarity to the White norm plays an important role in predicting stereotypic responses to media content. Here, the greater the difference between racial and ethnic portrayals and White depictions, the more unfavorable the evaluations of minorities in U.S. society” (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006, p. 319). It has been proven that racism and misrepresentation have been noticed in prime-time television, to a more serious degree than Netflix for that matter (Corfield, 2017). Regardless, television acts as an agent designated to classify certain

characteristics of individual characters, just as Netflix was discovered to be doing as well. (Bandura, 1986, 2009; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signnorielli, & Shanahan, 2002).

Research Questions

RQ1: Does Netflix misrepresent races by inclusion and portrayal of characters in their Originals?

The clear connection between Netflix and racial misrepresentation is that Netflix chooses to advertise certain originals that pertain to their larger audiences, which are known to be predominantly white, middle-class Americans, and tend to underserve other target audiences, “According to a recent [NYT column](#), Black staffers at Netflix took it upon themselves in 2015 to explain how chief content officer Ted Sarandos was overlooking an opportunity to cater to an underserved audience on the platform” (Fast Company, 2020, para. 4. Meanwhile, Netflix was also catering heavily to White viewers from Great Britain, “Netflix was spending more money on programming for British people and anime fans than for Black Americans” (Fast Company, 2020, Web). White, middle-class Americans can view other minorities based on in-group discrimination, which connects the research to SIT. Also, the misrepresentation of race is an obvious characteristic of CRT, which suggests that racism is a known American fact (Littlejohn et al., 2014). Adding to that, another characteristic of CRT is Whiteness, which could play a vital part in the overall streaming and production of Netflix Originals. If the audience is middle-class White Americans, then most of the Original films will be produced to cater to that audience’s interests and social identification characteristics. Other variables such

as age, gender, occupation and education level will be researched to see if these variables served as the means for misrepresentation rather than race.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The study's design is a content analysis. A content analysis involves the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to definitions and rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories. A content analysis contains data that is derived from a combination of decisions that the researcher must make relating to what he or she specifically wants to look at, where it can be located, and how to approach it upon examination (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2014). This is a content analysis analyzed Netflix Original films, rather than series, but will then compare the results of racial inclusion and portrayals, as well as demographics to the findings of James Corfield's (2017) data on Netflix Original series.

Sample

The population from which the sample was selected was Netflix Original films. Netflix Original series were not included. The sample for this study is purposive in nature. The researcher used a generated list that was updated on April 22nd of 2020 (What's On Netflix, 2020). All the films on the generated list included the cover of the movie, the title name, genre, and rating. The website Netflix was searched utilizing the key words "Original Dramas" and "Original Comedies". A purposive sample was used to select Originals from two well-known genres Comedy and Drama, which are categorized by the placement in Comedy or Drama of the Original by Netflix. The two genres were selected because of past research findings and the opinions of prominent members of a

minority who have a respected presence in the media industry within America. In an interview Mario Van Peebles, a Black American Film Director, said:

“After *New Jack City*, I went around pitching another type of story, a Black family drama. But they kept wanting to put the family in the 'hood or on crack. "Hey," they'd say, "the movies that make money are killer or shoot-em-up movies. Whatever makes money” (Rhines, 1996, p. 87).

Lee Daniels, a Black American film and television writer, agrees with Peebles, and in a similar interview he states,

I think that safe is always better from a studio perspective and safe equals comedy and safe equals action in regards to [Black] people ... If you are real and honest and making a true story, it is hard to penetrate white America (Talbert, 2010, p. 1).

From this information alone, it is noted that Comedies and Dramas are two genres that are associated with minority cast members underneath the direction of Whites, and in terms of production rates and having a connection to minorities and media. It seems that studios want Black filmmakers to direct and/or produce action or crime-dramas. Within the sample for research, these genres were included in the random selection process of the Netflix Originals. Although these interviews were conducted over ten years ago, it seems that there is still a reoccurring problem with misrepresentation of minorities,

considering James Corfield's findings in 2017. Originals that contained overlapping genres (i.e. Comedy-Dramas) were excluded from the sample. For example, *Alex Strangelove (2018)*, was listed as both a Drama and a Comedy, so this Original Film was excluded from the sample. Also excluded were genres like Children and Family, Anime, Documentaries, International movies, as well as stand-up comedy sets. Each Original was watched from start to finish to correctly code the relevant aspects of the characters. All films within the sample contained the English language and were produced in the United States. To further explain the purposive process regarding the selection of the sample, each Original was randomly selected to match the same proportion of Originals as the other genre within the study, meaning that both genres, Dramas and Comedies, contained the same percentage of the total population of the Originals to analyze, resulting in one, final sample. Twenty percent of the full list of comedies were randomly selected, using a random number generator via online. The ten Original films that were selected were the following: *The Main Event*, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *The Ridiculous 6*, *Airplane Mode*, *The Week Of*, *Wine Country*, *The Christmas Chronicles*, *Game Over*, *Man! The After Party*, and *Stepsisters*. Out of the sixty-eight Original Dramas, fourteen (20%) were randomly selected using the same random number generator from random.org. (n.d.) The fourteen Original Dramas were the following: *Sergio*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Extinction*, *Tigertail*, *The Last Thing He Wanted*, *Hold the Dark*, *American Son*, *To the Bone*, *Pandora*, *Beasts of No Nation*, *Kidnapping Stella*, *The Red Sea Diving Resort*, and *Tallulah*.

Measurement and Coding

A codebook was established. Each character was coded for the portrayal, prominence, race, and other demographic variables. Type of each Original was recorded from Netflix's categorization. Both the audio and visual elements of the Original were analyzed. In addition, a second coder was also used during the research. to establish the reliability of the coding scheme. Both coders analyzed the same Original films, and both coded in the same manner.

First, type of Original was relevant to the information that was analyzed. The type of Original was a genre, stemming from Netflix Original's categorization. The Netflix Originals were recorded according to how Netflix coded them, which assigned only one, precise genre to each, individual original. The genres included two of the most popular genres, Comedy and Drama.

Second, prominence was a variable that had been derived and modified from the content analysis of Corfield (2017) and was the overall importance of the character. These were coded by the researcher at a nominal level. There was only one code per character in this category. Characters who had fewer than four lines were not coded and therefore was not represented in the study (Corfield, 2017). Coding for main, minor, and background characters was operationalized from Sink and Mastro (2016). Main characters were defined as recurring, regular characters who were central to the film's plot and had constantly appeared within the original film. Minor characters were infrequent, semi-regular, or one-time characters who played a supporting role in the film. Background characters were non-central characters with no more than five lines that one would not expect to appear in future scenes of the film.

Third, Inclusion, derived and modified from Corfield's (2017) content analysis, was the proportion of different races represented in the Originals; specifically, it was the number of times a certain race was represented. This was done at a ratio-level count of how many people of each race were represented. Proportions were calculated from the count of people of each race divided by the total number of characters in the Original that were coded. The unit of analysis is the Original but were determined by examining the character-level category of race. Races selected to classify were the following:

Caucasian, representing White and European, Black, representing African American, African, and Central American, Latino/a, representing Mexican, Spanish, and South American, Asian, representing Pacific Islanders and Eastern Asia, and Middle Eastern. A multiracial or unknown category was also included to classify if the character could not be coded in the other categories due to uncertainty or obscurity.

Finally, portrayals, in the form of roles, stood as the character's purpose within the Original. These roles, derived from the subsection "Character" (LiteraryDevices, 2013). were coded by the researcher at a nominal level, with each character receiving one role of the four for this category. This was a necessary and important variable to analyze because it could have potentially connected certain races to commonly seen portrayals in media that could have misrepresented that race. If there was a common and reoccurring portrayal associated with a certain race, then this research would have brought light to this problem. The four roles were Confidant, Foil, Dynamic, and Static. Confidant was the portrayal of a character that the main character confided in (any secret, important personal information, plot changing info) and was typically, a best friend or sibling character. There are times that a character would fall into that specific category, but also

been another one as well. If that was the case, the most general category, such as dynamic or foil, was selected. Foil characters, often designed to be a challenge for the important characters, were ones that possessed the exact opposite qualities of one of the more important characters. Dynamic characters, usually found in Dramas, changed as a character throughout the story. These changes were normally internal that could be for better or for worse. Static characters were non-changing, discrete characters where a lot of information was not shared. This character was almost unknown.

Other variables that pertained to the character's demographics were also analyzed. These variables and the explanation of these variables were derived from Corfield's (2017) content analysis. Gender was categorized as either male, female, or transgender stemming from previous research studies and scholarship. In instances where gender could not be categorized because of a character's obscurity, the result was 'cannot code.' Sexuality was coded based on Neuendorf (2000) and the classification of a character's primary sexual orientation. Heterosexuality was coded as "an individual whose primary sexual orientation is an attraction toward members of the opposite sex. If a character is married and does not express a homosexual orientation, code as heterosexual." Homosexuality was coded as, "an individual whose primary sexual orientation is for members of the same sex." Bisexuality was coded as "an individual whose sexual orientation includes a desire for members of both genders" Background, minor, and major characters were evaluated on their age which was defined by Signorielli and Bacue (1999). Age was measured by the social categorization of stages in the life cycle of the character. Characters were categorized as "(1) children or adolescents, (2) young adults with minor responsibilities, (3) middle-aged adults who had career and/or family

responsibilities, or (4) elderly” (p. 534). In addition, a “character that was seen in more than one phase of the life cycle, for example as a child and as an adult” was classified as ‘cannot code’ for these two variables (p. 534). Due to most characters holding an occupation in today’s television and film industry (Smith, Choueiti, Prescott, & Pieper, 2012), occupation was coded based on the measurement of authority and power of the occupation as opposed to the title of the job itself. Occupation was grouped based on the classification of the job itself: position of power/prestige (e.g., manager, boss, sergeant, principle, doctor), traditional/average job (e.g., teacher, laborer, policeman), and position of no power (e.g., student, intern, waitress).

Inter-coder Reliability

The researcher used Krippendorff's alpha to calculate the intercoder reliability for all the variables in the study. Intercoder reliability was evaluated at two stages. First, intercoder reliability was evaluated after both coders coded five out of twenty Original Films. The coders then compared and discussed discrepancies to reach full agreement. The scores for the first round of intercoder reliability were the following: Genre: 1.00, Character Type: .80, Character Portrayal: .68, Character Race: .82, Character Social Age: .66, Character Sexuality: .42, Character Occupation: .51, and Character Gender: .83. After this was completed, the two coders then coded two more films and met again to compare their coding results. The results then showed that the coders coded similarly, almost completely the same, to be exact. The new scores were the following: Genre: 1.00, Type: .91, Portrayal: .91, Race: 1.00, Social Age: 1.00, Sexuality: 1.00, Occupation: 1.00, and Gender: 1.00.

Data Analysis

This content analysis analyzed Netflix original films in order to determine whether Netflix misrepresented races by inclusion and portrayal of characters in their Originals. This research analyzed misrepresentation of races in Netflix Originals by the inclusion of races within the films. The researcher calculated the frequencies that were derived from the count of people of each race divided by the total number of characters in the Original that were coded. The unit of analysis was the Original but was determined by examining the character-level category of race. The researcher used data from the United States Census Bureau statistics on racial demographics to calculate the misrepresentation. The racial demographics were taken from the July 1st, 2019 USCB table on race and Hispanic origin. The statistics for the total amount of persons within each race were White, 76.3%, Black or African American alone, 13.4%, American Indian or Alaskan Native alone, 1.3%, Asian alone, 5.9%, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander alone, 0.2%, Two or more races, 2.8%, Hispanic or Latino, 18.5% (USBC, 2019). The researcher used these numbers to analyze possible misrepresentation by lack of inclusion if some races did not appear within the Netflix Originals to the amount of people recorded under the race in the statistics.

The researcher analyzed misrepresentation through portrayals of characters, coding them on a code sheet and using SPSS through the access of a license obtained by the University of Missouri – St. Louis, to conduct the analyses. Descriptive statistics and chi-square analyses were conducted to answer the research question.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Initial Analysis

The research question of the study asked whether Netflix misrepresented races through inclusion and portrayals of characters in Netflix Originals. The research question was answered by closely examining various variables in relation to the characters' portrayals including character type, gender, social age, sexuality, and occupation.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the full sample of 20 Netflix Originals, containing 154 characters who were coded in order to determine misrepresentation within the films. One way in which the study analyzed misrepresentation was through levels of inclusion of different races within the films. Races that were present in the films were White, Black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Multiracial. White was the most coded race; however, a lower proportion of Whites were included in the Original films (59.7%) than exist in Corfield's study (60.6%) and the U.S. population (76.3%). Blacks were the exact opposite in that a higher proportion of Blacks were included in the Original films (26%) than exist in Corfield's study (19.7%) and the United States (13.4%). The proportion of Latinos included in the Original films (5.8%) was lower than the number that exists in Corfield's study (11.9%) and the U.S. (18.5%). The proportion of Asians within the Originals (1.3%) was lower than the number of Asians coded in Corfield's study (7.6%) and living in the U.S. (5.9%), and the proportions of Middle Eastern characters within the films (0.6%) would fall into either the Asian alone in the U.S. (5.9%) or the Two or More Races in the U.S. (2.8%) which would be higher than the

Corfield results (0.2%), yet lower than the U.S. population (2.8%). Overall, the proportions indicate that Blacks were overrepresented in comparison to U.S. population statistics, whereas White, Latino, Asian, and Middle Eastern races were underrepresented.

A chi-square test was used to determine whether type of character differed according to race within Netflix Original films. Three types of characters were analyzed which were Background character, Minor character, and Major character. The result of this analysis showed that there was no significant difference in type of character according to a character's race ($X^2 = 12.55$, $df = 12$, $p = .403$). In other words, the character's race did not influence their significance to the storyline of the film. See Figure 1.1.

A chi-square test was also used to determine whether a character's portrayal within the film was related to their character's race. The four portrayals that were coded were confidant, foil, dynamic and static. The analysis suggested that there was no significant difference in character portrayals according to race ($X^2 = 19.24$, $df = 18$, $p = .377$). In essence, the race of the character within the Original film did not determine their portrayal within the film. See Figure 1.2.

Another analysis examined whether a character's race and occupation within the film were related. Another Chi-square analysis was used. The analysis suggested that there was no significant difference in the character's occupation and their race ($X^2 = 4.36$, $df = 6$, $p = .628$). More commonly, a character's race did not determine their job title held within the film. See Figure 1.3.

Analyses were also conducted to determine whether Blacks and Whites were equally represented across character type ($X^2 = 5.35$, $df = 2$, $p = .069$), portrayal ($X^2 = 2.01$, $df = 3$, $p = .571$), occupation ($X^2 = .689$, $df = 1$, $p = .407$), and film type ($X^2 = 49.65$, $df = 19$, $p = .000$). The results indicated there were no significant differences for any of the variables besides film type. In essence, the film's character's portrayal, nor occupation were influential upon the equal representation of Blacks and Whites. yet one could safely suggest that White characters were more likely to be main characters and Black characters were likely to be minor character based solely on the approachable significant result of .069 which was produced by comparing character types to the two races Black and White. However, results show that representation was uneven regarding film type and overall representation between races, meaning that, Blacks and Whites were not represented equally together, rather they were represented in their own films, rather than in the same film together. To further explain, after running specific data through SPSS that only included the two races Black and White, and the two film types, Comedy and Genre, the analysis yielded results that show a clear implication. This implication is that when there are many Black characters in a film, the majority of the film's entire cast is Black, and when there are many White characters in a film, the majority of the film's entire cast is primarily all White. An example from each perspective would be *Wine Country* with eight codable White characters to zero codable Black characters, and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* with seven codable Black characters to zero codable White characters. See Figure 1.4 for the entire crosstab results.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Implications

Anticipated research findings were that Netflix would have reduced its amount of misrepresentation as compared to that found in Corfield's (2017) study, in which he analyzed misrepresentation within Netflix television series. In his findings, he discovered that Netflix offers more promise with the increased quantity of characters from minority groups, yet their quality of minority members needed improvement (Corfield, 2017). I predicted that Netflix Original films would show less misrepresentation of races than that which was found in Corfield's (2017) study of Netflix Original series. I predicted this based on Netflix wanting to expand productions more globally and include more groups of people found around the world. In an interview, done by John Hopewell from *Variety*, with Erick Barmack, Netflix's Vice President, he mentions, "We try to listen to the audience. There's a sense that we can efficiently use that capital towards series that users want from around the world, so that is an interesting thing" (Hopewell, 2018, para 20). The results of the analysis supported my prediction about representation by inclusion. My prediction was supported since Blacks were being overrepresented compared to the U.S. population in 2019. However, other minority races were not represented as fairly, such as Latinos, Asians, and Middle Easterners. In addition, I did predict that there would be misrepresentation still present due to the sheer fact that racism is a common fact and a characteristic of American culture, as well as Whiteness still being held as a social norm, both derived from Critical Race Theory (Sleeter, 2016). These results show that even

though there is not any misrepresentation of race based on a character's type, portrayal, occupation, and overall inclusion within the film, there is, however, misrepresentation found in an overall balance between Whites and Blacks within the same film. In essence, Whites and Blacks may be represented equally on the streaming platform, but they are not racially represented equally in the same film, meaning, the films are either predominantly all White or all Black when either Whites or Blacks receive representation. This result was discovered using SPSS when only the Black and White races were compared side by side in all twenty of the Original films. See figure 1.4 for more details.

However, it is worth noting that when looking at the sample in Corfield's study (2017), there were not many Netflix series that were dominated by a single race unlike this study where we had Netflix Original films contain casts filled with mainly one race. For example, Africans almost fill the entire casts for *Beasts of No Nation* and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. This is important because this could help explain why we see Blacks and Whites being represented well with other characters who belong to their same race, rather than being represented equally together. To further explain, one study contained only one film with Asians, but within that one film, all the codable characters were Asian, which then yields much more different results than the other study.

In relation to SIT, this theory helps us understand the findings concerning Whites and Blacks not being equally represented together in films. The theory's framework explains that social groups exist and we as humans tend to identify ourselves and place ourselves within those groups. With knowing this information, we can see how Netflix Originals can be produced to cater specifically to certain social groups, hence Whites

dominating one film and Blacks dominating the other, rather than both being equally represented together. Whiteness and Critical Race Theory only support the past accusations that Netflix has received regarding how they presented certain races in some of their Originals, however, in this study, there did not seem to be any false representation or mistreatment of a certain race within the Originals that were coded.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations worth noting are the fact that this study only analyzed Netflix Original films and no other forms of media found within Netflix. Also, only analyzing one streaming service and not others may make it challenging to know whether all streaming services misrepresent races based on the portrayal of characters. Another limitation is that both coders were of the white, middle-class American target audience that Netflix caters their streaming services for, which could make coding biased. Future research needs to be conducted across all streaming services to make sure that other streaming service companies are in the right direction toward fair and equal representation as it seems Netflix is doing. Also, future studies need to focus more on the actual actions of the characters and overall treatment of characters of race, rather than inclusion and how the character is portrayed based on their role in the film, as well as their importance to the plot. This will give a more clear and salient understanding to how races are not only represented but treated within the film.

Conclusion

Misrepresentation of races has been found across different platforms of media (Mastro, 2008). Various factors contribute to this happening such as stereotypical

assumptions, passed down stories from communities, and even how we as humans identify ourselves and who we identify with. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974) helps explain to us that because of how and who we identify as, as well as belonging to a certain group, is why there are many misrepresentations within the media today. Our world of communicators shares vast amounts of interpretations based solely on their own interpretations, which can then in return cause miscues and false misrepresentations that media can then enhance in any form of outlet, in our case, streaming services. To go along with this explanation, is also the fact that racism will always be around in our society and that it serves as a natural process in life. Within that process, whiteness is an extraordinarily strong indicator for white members of our society to perceive other races as different, questionable, and sometimes offensive, threatening, and dangerous. Given this information, we can see how one would apply these methods of misrepresentation, with the creation of Netflix Originals. I think this will be beneficial to the theories by showing that we can use older theories in a new, modern and contemporary world. As our society continues to grow more accepting of different concepts, theories, and ways of communication, we also must keep in mind that old, traditional methods and beliefs can still hold true to the time. The knowledge of the research is also beneficial to the theories in how it will show that history, over time, is adapting or changing regarding the use of media, such as streaming services, and major societal pressures such as racism and prejudices are constantly changing. Social identity theory is supported by showing that members of certain races tend to identify as a member of their group and because of this, it helps explain that Whites identify with other Whites, dominating one film, while Blacks identify with Blacks, dominating another film. Critical Race Theory was not

because there was not an evident amount of Whiteness and prejudice, serving as the main reason why at least two groups differ or disagree on something within the Original film causing internal conflict within the plot. Like mentioned in the introduction, if there was a chance that research could have uncovered a reduction of misrepresentation of races on Netflix, then there could have possibly been a system or attitude, or mindset to potentiate, to keep the process moving, which in return would counter prejudice, racism, and bigotry in the media.

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Table 1*Pearson Chi Square Results*

Coding Category	X² statistic	p-value
Film Type x Race	148.75	.02
Character Race x Type	12.55	.40
Character Race x Portrayal	19.24	.38
Character Race x Occupation	4.36	.63
Black Vs. White x Type	5.35	.07
Black Vs. White x Portrayal	2.01	.57
Black Vs. White x Occupation	0.69	.41
Black Vs. White x Film	49.65	.00

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for all variables/content categories included in the code sheet.

Film Type		
Comedy	11	55%
Drama	9	45%

Character Race		
White	92	59.7%
Black	40	26.0%
Latino	9	5.8%
Asian	2	1.3%
Middle Eastern	1	0.6%
Multiracial	9	5.8%
Cannot Code	1	0.6%

Character Portrayal		
Confidant	23	14.9%
Foil	28	18.2%
Dynamic	29	18.8%
Static	74	48.1%

Character Type		
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Background Character	28	18.2%
Minor Character	57	37.0%
Major Character	69	44.8 %
Character Social Age		
Children	2	1.3%
Adolescents	15	9.7%
Young adults with few responsibilities	39	25.3%
Settled or middle-aged adults who had career and/or family responsibilities.	92	59.7%
Elderly	6	3.9%
Character Occupation		
Position of Power	98	63.6%
Position of No Power	56	36.4%
Character Gender		
Male	98	63.6%
Female	56	36.4%
Could Not Code	0	0%
Character Sexuality		
Heterosexual	119	77.3%
Homosexual	9	5.8%
Bisexual	0	0%
Could Not Code	26	16.9%

Table 3 *Race X Character Type*

	Background Character	Minor Character	Main Character	Total
White	14	36	42	92
Black	13	14	13	40
Hispanic	0	3	6	9
Asian	0	1	1	2
Middle Eastern	0	0	1	1
Multiracial	1	3	5	9
Could not Code	0	0	1	1
Total	28	57	69	154

Table 4

Race X Character Portrayal

	Confidant	Foil	Dynamic	Static	Total
White	10	19	17	46	92
Black	7	5	8	20	40
Hispanic	3	1	3	2	9
Asian	1	0	0	1	2

Middle Eastern	0	1	0	0	1
Multiracial	2	1	1	5	9
Could not Code	0	1	0	0	1
Total	23	28	29	74	154

Table 5

Race X Character Occupation

	Power	No Power	Total
White	44	48	92
Black	16	24	40
Hispanic	4	5	9
Asian	0	2	2
Middle Eastern	0	1	1
Multiracial	3	6	9
Could not Code	0	1	1
Total	67	87	154

Table 6

Film X Black X White

	White	Black	Total
Airplane Mode	4	1	5
American Son	2	2	4
Beasts of No Nation	0	7	7
Extinction	5	1	6
Game Over Man	8	2	10
Hold the Dark	4	1	5
Kidnapping Stella	3	0	3
Sergio	4	1	5
Step Sisters	5	3	8
Tallulah	6	1	7
The After Party	3	3	6
The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind	0	7	7
The Last Thing He Wanted	4	1	5
The Main Event	5	5	10
The Red Sea Diving Resort	8	1	9
The Ridiculous 6	8	1	9
The Week Of	6	2	8
To the Bone	6	0	6
To the Boys I've Loved Before	3	1	4
Wine Country	8	0	8
Total	92	40	132

Appendix A.

Films in Sample

Airplane Mode

American Son

Beasts of No Nation

Extinction

Game Over Man

Hold the Dark

Kidnapping Stella

Sergio

Stepsisters

Tallulah

The After Party

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind

The Last Thing He Wanted

The Main Event

The Red Sea Diving Resort

The Ridiculous 6

The Week Of

To the Bone

To the Boys I've Loved Before

Wine Country

Appendix B.

Code Sheet

Genre	Comedy	Drama					
Character ID							
Character Type	Background	Minor	Major				
Character Portrayal	Confidant	Foil	Dynamic	Static			
Race	White	Black	Asian	Latino	Middle Eastern	Multi-Racial	Cannot Code
Social Age	Child	Adolescent	Young Adult	Middle-Aged	Elderly		
Sexuality	Heterosexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Cannot Code			
Occupation	Power Position	No Power	Cannot Code				
Gender	Male	Female	Transgender	Cannot Code			

Appendix C.

Codebook

Inclusion: the proportions of different races represented

1. **Caucasian** (White, European).
2. **Black** (African American, African, Central American).
3. **Latino/a** (Mexican, Spanish, South American)
4. **Asian** (Pacific Islanders, Eastern Asia).
5. **Middle Eastern** (Southern Asia, Turkey, Israel, etc.)
6. **Multiracial** (Coded this way if a character has direct/nuclear family members from multiple races that are clearly seen in the film)
7. **Cannot Code** (This will be coded for a character within the film who does not clearly share his/her race, the film does not bring light to the racial information.)

Demographics: Other factors that could contribute to representation

Social Age: Estimate the stage at which the character operates in his/her interactions with others.

1.Children

2. Adolescents

3. Young adults with few responsibilities
4. Settled or middle-aged adults who had career and/or family responsibilities.
5. Elderly

Occupations: Grouped by job classification:

1. Position of power/prestige (E.g. manager, boss, sergeant, principle, doctor)
2. Position of no power (E.g. student, intern, waitress)

Gender: Report the biological sex of the character.

1. Male
2. Female
3. Transgender
4. Cannot Code

Sexuality: Report the primary sexual orientation of the character if this is discernable.

1. Heterosexual:

An individual whose primary sexual orientation is an attraction toward members of the opposite sex. If a character is married and does not express a homosexual orientation, code as heterosexual.

2. Homosexual:

An individual whose primary sexual orientation is for members of the same sex.

3. Bisexual:

An individual whose sexual orientation includes a desire for members of both genders.

4. Cannot code.

Portrayals: the roles of the character within the media selection.

1. **Confidant.** One that the main character confides in. (Any secret, important personal information, plot changing info.) Typically, a best friend or sibling character. *There are times that a character may fall into this specific category, but also be another one as well. If that's the case, the most general category, such as dynamic or foil, will be selected.*

2. **Foil Character.** One that possesses the exact opposite qualities of one of the more important characters. Often designed to be a challenge for the important character.
3. **Dynamic.** Changes as a character throughout the story. Changes are normally internal. Could be for better or for worse. Usually found in Dramas.
4. **Static.** Non-changing, discrete character where a lot of information is not shared. The character is almost unknown.

Prominence. This variable has been derived and reconstructed from the content analysis of James Corfield and is the overall importance of the character.

1. **Background Character.** Not expectant of reappearance
2. **Minor Character.** The character does not add value to the plot and is barely mentioned in the original overall.
3. **Main Character.** The character is clearly mentioned more than 10x in the Original, and the character adds serious value to plot.

Type of Original. A genre, stemming from Netflix Original's visually placed category. The Netflix Originals will be coded according to how Netflix coded them, assigning only one, precise genre to each, individual original.

1. **Drama.** Original involves the gradual internal development of one or more characters.
2. **Comedy.** Original contains mostly humor, is satirical and amusing, while ending in a cheerful way.