Why Seeing Yourself Represented on Screen Is So Important

"Black Panther" has been hailed as a model success story for depicting diversity on screen. According to past research, the representation of minority groups in mass media has a powerful educational impact on audiences.

Last year, researchers at USC Annenberg published their annual report on diversity—or, really, the lack thereof—in Hollywood. Once again, they wrote, their findings "suggest that exclusion is the norm rather than the exception in Hollywood."

And then Black Panther—with its virtually all-black cast, fantastic representation of strong women, African setting, and nuanced characters and storylines—happened. For a brief two hours, our superhero is T'Challa, an African king hailing from a technologically advanced country who uses his superhuman strength to protect his people and their way of life. (...) The record-breaking response at the box office to the Marvel/Disney film, not to mention the surrounding social media flurry and subsequent thinkpieces, reveal just how hungry audiences are for stories like Black Panther—stories that center those who are sorely underrepresented in mass media.

On Monday, former First Lady Michelle Obama offered some insight on the film's cultural impact, tweeting: "Congrats to the entire #blackpanther team! Because of you, young people will finally see superheroes that look like them on the big screen. I loved this movie and I know it will inspire people of all backgrounds to dig deep and find the courage to be heroes of their own stories."

As Obama noted, representation matters. Carlos Cortes, a historian who wrote the book *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach About Diversity*, offered an important example in a 1987 article of what happens when it's lacking. (…) "First, whether intentionally or unintentionally, both the news and the entertainment media 'teach' the public about minorities, other ethnic

groups and societal groups, such as women, gays, and the elderly," Cortes wrote. "Second, this mass media curriculum has a particularly powerful educational impact on people who have little or no direct contact with members of the groups being treated." (…)

Sadly, little has changed since the 80s. A 2011 study conducted by The Opportunity Agenda found that black males in media are usually portrayed negatively, limited to a handful of "positive" stereotypes, painted as flat characters, or missing altogether. (...) Audiences—especially those with little exposure to those outside of their community—typically equate these limited, and harsh, media representations with the real world. That, in turn, can lead to "less attention from doctors to harsher sentencing by judges, lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school, lower odds of getting loans, and a higher likelihood of being shot by police," the authors write.

The report also found that black males themselves were impacted by these media portrayals: "Negative media stereotypes (thugs, criminals, fools, and the disadvantaged) are demoralizing and reduce self-esteem and expectations," they write. (…)

A 2012 study looking at representation on TV and its impact on children's self-esteem had similar findings. In a survey of almost 400 black and white boys and girls, researchers found that the only demographic that didn't experience lower self-esteem after watching TV was white boys. They pointed to racial stereotypes and the way black characters were portrayed as one explanation: "Black male characters are disproportionately shown as buffoons, or as menacing and unruly youths, and Black female characters are typically shown as exotic and sexually available," the authors wrote. The TV portrayals of white boys, on the other hand, were "quite positive in nature." (…)

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