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Declaration

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Background Information

Superhero films are one of the highest viewed genre of all time, attracting all range of viewers all over the world. With the advancement of technology such as motion-capture and CGI, companies such as *Marvels Studio* and *DC* have been able to pull off greater sophistication in film making, catering to the endless hype and crave that their huge audience base is seeking for.

Produced by Marvel Studios and directed by Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* is one of the most successful superhero movie that has been produced, being the highest grossing superhero movie of all time. In the short span of a few month, it has grossed up to 1.344 billion USD in box office.

1.2 Rationale

The issue of Black representation in media has been much discussed and debated on. Films are means in which ideas and messages are conveyed to the public, how certain groups of people are portrayed in the media will have a great social impact. And oftentimes, these false stereotypes are often indirectly influencing the audience, as they “reaffirm attitudes and opinions that are already established” (Davison, 2017). Similarly, if the media portrays Blacks more authentically, it will send out a positive message into society (Chakravarty, 2017). With the rise of recent movements such as *Black Lives Matter* and *#OscarSoWhite* (Rose, 2018), many have become more aware and critical of the representation of Blacks in media. With the release of *Black Panther*, many have praised it as a breakthrough for Hollywood films and celebrated its progressive nature. Thus, it would be of value to analyse how a movie that is so different from the conventional movie produced by Hollywood would portray Blacks, and reach to a

conclusion on whether it is truly progressive, or are there still elements of negative depiction of Blacks.

1.3 Thesis Statement

Despite the movie's attempt to give a more wholesome representation of Blacks, it unintentionally resulted in misrepresentation in some areas.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. How are Blacks presented in the movie Black Panther?
- ii. How are Black ancestry presented in the movie Black Panther?
- iii. Do these depictions offer a more progressive or regressive towards Blacks and African culture?

1.5 Scope of Research / Delimitations(s)

This paper will only be examining the 2018 version of Black Panther. There have been many versions of the Black Panther since the 20st century. The recent one is the most popular and most discussed movie out of the all. Thus, it is this paper's utmost interest to analyse the movie.

1.6 Usefulness / Significance

Due to the popularity of Superhero movies, they have the capability to reach out to a wide range of audience. Media has the potential to influence the minds of people, thus how certain groups of people, in this case, the Blacks, are portrayal should not be dismissed. In the age of social justice, insights into how Blacks are portrayed in a movie that received praises from many will be beneficial to the research field so as to find out whether a movie is truly as progressive as many deemed and how much should be done.

1.7 Limitations

As *Black Panther* has just been released this year, there might not be much academic journals on the internet done on this particular film for reference. However, it will not be as much of a trouble as this paper will be utilising frameworks by various authors and applying it to the movie.

Chapter 2 - Lit Review

2.1.1 Black Panther film

Black Panther is a Superhero film produced by Marvels Studio in 2018. In just a short period of 3 months, it has become the highest grossing Superhero movie with a box office of 1.185 billion USD, and has won numerous awards such as two BET Awards, four Golden Trailer Awards, four MTV Music and TV Awards and many more. This film revolves around the kingdom of Wakanda, which is being populated by people of black ancestry. It is characterized by its representation of black culture, having portrayed traditional African society and casting Black protagonist and antagonists. This paper seeks to delve deeper into its portrayal of Blacks.

2.2 Representation and impacts

Representation is defined as “the way in which media portrays particular groups, communities, experiences, ideas, or topics from a particular ideology or value perspective” (Beach 2016).

2.2.2 Cultivation Theory

The Cultivation Theory posits that people “have a tendency to hold specific and distinct conceptions of reality, conceptions that are congruent with the most consistent and pervasive images and values of the medium” (Shanahan & Morgan 1999). In other words, media has the ability to shape people’s perception and the society if the media is perpetually filled with inauthentic representation of certain groups of people.

Historically, Blacks are being negatively depicted on the media, and the media is being rather consistent in their portrayal of Blacks, which according to the Cultivation

theory, will lead to viewers' having conceptions of what the media presents to them, especially viewers who are most exposed to these media.

2.2.3 Representation Theory

The Representation Theory asserted that “all text, however ‘realistic’ they might seem to be, are constructed representations rather than simply transparent ‘reflection’, recordings, transcriptions or reproduction of a pre-existing reality” and that people “make modality judgements about them” (Griffiths 2010).

Blacks in media are being represented in a certain way, no matter in the film adaptation of *Black Panther* or the comic. The media only presents one side of reality, constructed by the director, which is made to seem “authentic”. This impacts viewers’ perception on certain groups of people will be affected if they are exposed to media misrepresenting them.

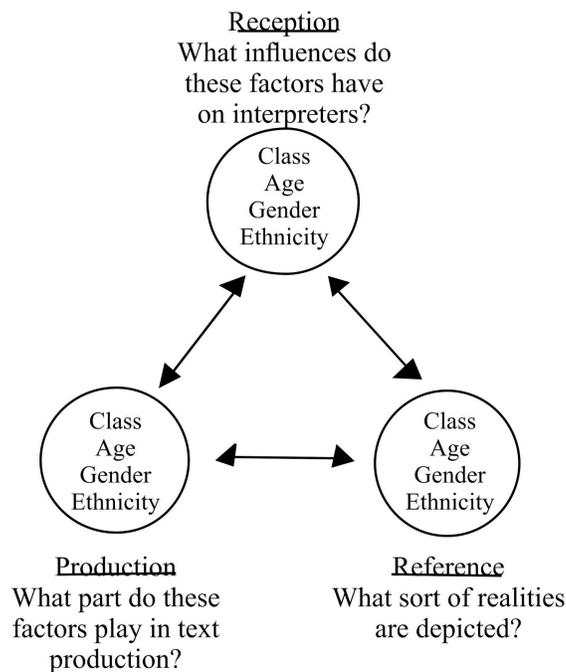


Fig 1.1

Based on the theories and literary papers, we can now conclude that the media, does in fact, has a direct influence over the audience. This is in consensus with the various scholars (Bittner, 1997; Castel, 1996; Brosius & Engel, 1996) who argued that the saying that the effects of media on society are limited is a serious misconception considering that the media impact on all social classes. With the success of *Black Panther*, it serves as a turning point for filmmaking. It would then be of value to analyse the comic and film to analyse how Blacks are portrayed as they have a direct impact on the audience.

2.3 Blacks Depiction in Media

2.3.1 Distorted Black Portrayal in Media

Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys (Bell, Delimpaltadaki, 2011) has classified the distorted patterns of portrayal in media to these areas:

Underrepresentation Overall	For instance, as characters in video games; as “talking head” experts called in to offer perspectives and analysis in the news; as computer users in TV commercials; as users of luxury items in print ads; and as “relatable” characters with well developed personal lives (e.g., fathers) in fiction shows and films.
Negative associations exaggerated	Particularly criminality, unemployment, and poverty. The idle black male on the street corner is not the “true face” of poverty in America, but he is the dominant one in the world as depicted by media.

Positive associations limited	Particularly, sports, physical achievement in general, virility, and musicality. While the media’s version of America is populated by some black males intended to inspire, they tend to represent a relatively limited range of qualities to the exclusion of a variety of other everyday virtues.
The “problem frame”	Due to both distortions and also accurate and sympathetic discussion, black males tend to be overly associated with intractable problems
Missing stories	Many important dimensions of black males’ lives, such as historical antecedents of black economic disadvantage and persistence of anti-black male bias, are largely ignored by the media.

It has been said that problematic representation of Black community members persists even in the twenty-first century (Castle Bell, Hopson, Weathers, & Ross, 2014), that the media does not depict Blacks properly, which will in turn enable the media to influence how audience members construct and view members of various cultural communities and impact how traditionally marginalized community members may view themselves (Harris & Weber, 2010).

This framework would serve as a guideline for this project, by utilizing the “opposite” of what it provides to analyse the positive portrayal of Blacks.

Though it may seem like Blacks are portrayed negatively in media, Donagher (1975) found that “Blacks are portrayed oftenly as a helper, a giver, and as cooperative and Black females were portrayed as virtuous”. Atkin (1992) also found that Blacks were

“more prominent in regulatory roles such as law enforcement officers and are depicted with more positive characteristics as before”.

There have been different arguments on whether the media has evolved into portraying Blacks more positively. Some also argued that although the quantity of African Americans images on television has increased, the quality of these images has not (Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002). Thus, this paper serves to delve deeper into the areas of Superhero films of the new released hit to analyse the depiction of Blacks in comparison to the original source.

2.3.2 Distorted Portrayal of Africa by Anthony Kimani

According to Hawk (1992), many westerners have never and might never visit Africa but they have a mental image of the continent. Their knowledge and perception of Africa is based from different media including books, news media, and the entertainment industry all which are produced by fellow westerners.

Black Panther is a movie produced by westerners that revolves around Africa, it is important to analyse how Africa is presented in the movie as Africa is a big part of black ancestry. Black Panther also has a huge audience base, in which their depiction of Africa would affect people's perception.

Kimani has used the example of works such as “*The Histories*” by Herodotus, who argues that “Africa is a continent which is inhabited by savages and nonhuman creatures while instantaneously presenting the favoured races such as Caucasians as the epitome of creation” (Kimani 2009). Another example used is Charles Darwin's work “*The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured*

Races in the Struggle for Life”, which implies that Africans were not as fully evolved as the caucasians and therefore did not fall within the “favoured races” and therefore are regarded as lower status than the Europeans.

2.4 Blacks in Superhero Movies

Having Black casts in Superhero Movies is not a common sight though in some cases Blacks have been casted as sidekicks for the White Superheroes in films such as Rhodey as Iron Man’s accomplice played by Terrence Howard and Don Cheadle, X-Men’s Storm casted by Halle Berry, Anthony Mackie who played Falcon in Captain America. In some cases, formerly white characters were cast with Black actors, which includes Idris Elba as Norse god Heimdall in Thor, and Michael B Jordan as the Fantastic Four’s Human Torch (Rose, 2018).

Only until recently has corporations such as *Marvels* feature Black Superheroes. As one of the few black superheroes to have his own comic book title, “the Panther’s appearance in this film would seem to signify Hollywood’s willingness to give black superheroes their ‘dues’ so as to appeal across American racial-ideology lines” (Claverie 2017).

From above, we can deduce that Blacks do not play a major role in Hollywood and the film industry, lacking proper representation in the media. However, *Black Panther* can be seen as a huge leap forward for the film industry, with its entire movie revolving around Blacks and Black culture, and its Black casts.

2.5 Critical Film Analysis

Critical Film Analysis is a framework by Prunes, Raine, and Litch (2002) of the Yale Film Studio, which serves as a guideline for analysing movies structurally. This paper will use the Critical Film Analysis to analyse the movie. By referring to the usage of techniques compiled by the Yale Film Studio, which includes but not limited to: Mise-en-scene such as Costume and Acting, Cinematography, Editing, Sound etc. to derive its analysis. This paper will also be taking into account the story plot, characters, and transcript for analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

With the critical film analysis framework explicated in Chapter 2, together with Bell's framework of distorted Blacks' portrayal in media, this paper will discuss how Blacks are being presented in the movie Black Panther.

This paper will look at few aspects of the movie, namely the characters, the locations, and the accessories of the characters to derive at a conclusion on whether the movie is progressive or regressive in their depiction of Blacks.

4.1 Introduction

In the movie Black Panther, the protagonist is T'Challa, while the antagonist being Erik (Killmonger), with Klaue being a minor White villain. The movie is set in Africa, namely Wakanda.

4.2 Portrayal of Blacks

4.2.1 Positive Depictions using Bell's framework

In Bell's work, she has classified the distorted patterns of Black's portrayal in media to these areas, which includes underrepresentation overall, negative association exaggerated, positive association limited, the "problem frame", and missing stories. We shall now break down Black Panther to analyse each areas.

4.2.1.1 Underrepresentation overall

On the area of underrepresentation overall, we can see that in the movie, this is not the case. The protagonist, T'Challa was acted out by Chadwick Boseman, the antagonist casted by Michael B. Jordan and the majority of the main characters and minor characters are also casted by Blacks. Contrary to conventional movies, Black Panther has a very well represented Black casts in terms of number. The majority of the important roles in the movies are are represented by Blacks and are being acted out by Blacks.

4.2.1.2 Negative Associations Exaggerated

In terms of negative associations exaggerated, there is not much of such instances. This paper first look at Erik (Killmonger), which is a black villain in the movie. Although he is Black and is presented as a heartless man that will do whatever it takes to achieve something, one could not help but also sympathise him, for that his goal to rule Wakanda is for the sake of other Black people:

Scene 1:

Erik: It's about two billion people all over the world that looks like us. Their lives are a lot harder.

Scene 2:

Erik: When black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or the resources to fight their oppressors.....They'll arm oppressed people all over the world so they can finally rise up and kill those in power.

We also learnt that an undesirable incident that happened in his childhood has turned him into who he is. Despite the negative associations displayed by this Black character, there is a more sympathetic and admirable side to his character, which is still a more wholesome representation of a black villain.

4.2.1.3 Positive Associations

On the contrary, there are more positive associations of Black people in the movie. First and foremost, we have a Black woman, Shuri being the head of the Scientific and technological aspect of the nation. Throughout the film, we can see that the Dora Milaje warriors of Wakanda are being represented by Black females, which serves to portray black women as courageous fighters who hold a major stake in protecting their nation. We also have a Black male superhero as the protagonist who saved his nation and the people from the villain. The fact that the producer chose to cast a Black superhero alone is a great breakthrough for the film industry, as it is one of the first superhero movies with Black superhero that receives a large audience base. In general, Wakanda is also presented as a high tech city with intelligent people who are able to utilise the nation's resources to create sophisticated items, which puts the Black in positive light.

4.2.1.4 The “Problem” Frame

There is a common stereotype of Blacks as the root of the problems in society, such as drug issues or violent issues. However, contrary to common stereotypes, the

movie presents Blacks as the saviors of society rather than framing them as the problems of society. At the end, T'Challa spearhead the "Wakanda Outreach Centre" where Nakia will oversee the social outreach while Shuri will take charge of the Science and Technology exchange. Wakanda has also vowed to provide aid in a United Nation Assembly. Instead of having societal problems associated to Blacks, Black Panther has attributed Blacks as those contributing to society.

4.2.1.4 Missing stories

In terms of missing stories, the movie attempts to paint a more wholesome picture of Black culture, by setting the context of the movie to Africa. The movie also touched on the issue of colonialism, slavery etc which is very much important in the history of Blacks and relevant to the current society. One instance is the scene in the museum with Killmonger and a woman curator:

Killmonger: Where's this one from?

Woman: The Bobo Ashanti Tribe...present day Ghana

Killmonger: What about this one?

Woman: That one's from the Edo people of Benin... 16th century. Fula tribe, I believe

Killmonger: It was taken by British soldiers in Benin but it's from Wakanda

Killmonger: How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?

In another scene when Killmonger is about to die, he refused to be healed, and make one final request:

Killmonger: Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. 'Cause they know death is better than bondage.

Slavery and colonialism are a huge part of Black history. The movie brought up the issue of colonialism and injustice towards Blacks, which are important parts of Blacks' history that is often dismissed and ignored by the media. As seen, in terms of "missing stories", the movie did its part in offering a more wholesome view towards Black history.

In conclusion, using Bell's framework on negative Blacks depiction in media, we can see that Black Panther does not possess the conventional negative depiction of Blacks like other movies.

4.2.2 People's perception of Blacks

In the movie, we also get a glimpse at how Blacks are typically perceived by the people. From two different scenes in Black Panther (Figure 4.2.2.1), there are close-up shots of Klaue repeatedly referring to the Wakandans as "savages". Even before his death, he is so firm in his belief that the Blacks are "savages" and they "didn't deserve" the vibraniums. There is a colonialistic mindset present in the character mentioned. As Klaue here is one of the only white characters in the movie, he represent the Whites in our society while the vibranium here symbolises the natural resources that these African nations possess. When the Whites colonised Africa, it is said that the goal was to "civilise" the Blacks. There is then a recurring idea that Blacks are "uncivilised" and that they are "barbarians". Such stereotypes still holds today, especially towards people of

African descent, due to the common stereotype that Africa is underdeveloped and uncivilised. This draws parallel to Kimani's work, who argued that works such as Herodotus's *"The Histories"* and Charles Darwin's *"The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Race in the Struggle for Life"* have caused these negative stereotypes of carry forward. The movie attempts to shed light at these negative stereotypes, while presenting to us the other side of the coin - Wakanda, as being a highly advanced nation with intelligent beings, contrary to the views hold by the villain.



Figure 4.2.2.1

In another scene, CIA agent Ross interrogates Klaue. When asked what he imagined Wakanda to be, he answered "shepherds, textiles, cool outfits" (figure 4.2.2.2). This here, also shows how people stereotype Africa to be, and associates Africa with the notion of backwardness.



Figure 4.2.2.2

4.3 Portrayal of Black Ancestry

The movie is set in Wakanda, which serves to give some screen time to African land and Black Culture in Africa, specifically the different culture present in parts of Africa.

4.3.1 Africa

4.3.1.1 External of Wakanda

There are a few scenes where Africa appears in the movie. One common trait among all these scenes is that Africa is presented as a country with beautiful landscapes. In the introductory scene to Wakanda, we see mountain ranges towering the sky (figure 4.3.1.1). This is contrasted to the introductory scene for other places present in the movie (figure 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.1.3). As seen, Wakanda which represents a nation in Africa, is portrayed as nature and greenery with no sorts of civilisation or man made structures while the other two countries, London in United Kingdom, and Busan in South Korea,

are both presented as highly developed cities with high rise skyscrapers and congested buildings. This is parallel to Kimani's paper, where he argued that the West continues to denigrate and besmirch Africans, where the media causes a misconception that Africa is a setting for wild adventure stories, which is still being carried forward today.



Figure 4.3.1.1.1



Figure 4.3.1.1.2



Figure 4.3.1.1.3

The film utilises the bird's eye view shot to give an aerial perspective of the scene of Africa, which captures the vast African land. This scene further reinforces the stereotypes that Africa is a land of primitivity as we see an open wilderness with herds of goats roaming freely. It is a land surrounded by trees, rivers and mountains (Figure 4.3.1.4). The scene proceeds to show the Africans living in mud houses (Figure 4.3.1.5).

It can be inferred that the initial motive of the director is to showcase to the audience how beautiful Africa really is, by putting lots of emphasis on shots on the nature aspects of Africa, enhancing the “positive associations” of Africa. The director attempts to incorporate the wonderful scenery of Africa to the movie, to present Africa as a beautiful place.

However, it is important to note that such depiction of Africa will continue to reinforce the stereotype that Africa is an undeveloped nation with no proper civilisation, but is just an open wilderness where animals roam freely around. The fact that the director presents the Africans living in mud houses will also reinforce the stereotype that Africans live in such primitive shelters and are cut out from the outside world, which is not the case as a majority of Africans live in urban areas. This is counterproductive as it resulted in a “missing story”, leaving out the realistic aspect of Africa.





Figure 4.3.1.1.4



Figure 4.3.1.1.5

4.3.1.2 Wakanda

Wakanda is a highly advanced nation in Black Panther with access to a powerful mineral called vibranium. Wakanda, being an African nation is portrayed as being more developed than any other nations, which is a positive association exaggerated. As great as it may seem, Wakanda is not as progressive as it seems.

Wakanda is highly unrealistic. It is a fictional utopia “dreamed up by the West and (will forever be subjected) to the limitations of others’ imaginations (Gatbara 2016). It is a nation that has been constructed and does not reflect accurately the situation in Africa, it will not help break the stereotype of African land.

Wakanda is also presented as a nation that heavily relies on vibranium. It implies that all the success of Wakanda is due to their abundance in such powerful natural resources which is granted to them because of their luck and not their hard work. Even with such intelligent nation, they are subservient in putting the fate of the whole nation in the hands of the king. And the method in which power is transferred well depends on the king's bloodline or your sheer strength in lethal combat, and not democratic. Here, we see some negative associations of Blacks being primitive and backward.

4.3.2 Indigenous Black Culture

In the movie, there are generally five tribes: the Merchant Tribe, Border Tribe, River Tribe, Mining Tribe and the Jabari Tribe.

In the River Tribe, there is a man in green costume wearing a lip plate (figure 4.3.2.1). In real life context, the lip plate was originated from the Mursi and Surma tribe in Ethiopia. In their culture, such lip plates are only to be worn by women and women only. However, the director has decided to use a man instead of a woman for this role, presumably to break the gender roles of the culture or perhaps due to lack of research of the culture involved, Either ways, there are “missing stories” as the movie is being historically and culturally inaccurate in attempting to present the culture involved.



Figure 4.3.2.1

During the waterfall challenge, when M'Baku from the Jabari Tribe decided to challenge T'Challa for the throne, he said "Glory to Hanuman" before proceeding with the fight (figure 4.3.2.2). Apparently, Hanuman is a Hindu deity, which is often referred to as the monkey god. As mention, this god that the Jabari tribe worshipped is originated from Hinduism. Although Black Panther is set in the context of Africa and the Jabari Tribe is one of such tribes, there seems to be a misrepresentation of culture in this area.



Figure 4.3.2.2

Throughout the movie, T'Challa appears to be wearing the sherwani (figure 4.3.2.3). Which again, is a traditional outfit originated from the Indian culture. Although it is not noticeable by the common audience, this is still one of the few areas of cultural misrepresentation in the movie.



Figure 4.3.2.3

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The movie is praised by many for being produced to offer a more progressive approach towards the depiction of Blacks and Black ancestry through a superhero film. The movie displays exotic costumes from different cultures in Africa and merge them all into the Wakandan culture. However, though the intended outcome was to showcase the beauty of African culture to its audience, but the issue of cultural appropriation is raised. This is due to the fact the the movie cherry picked different aspects of different cultures and create their own culture, without crediting the actual culture involved. For instance: the Gele headwrap from Nigeria, the lip plate from Ethiopia, the Kente cloth from Ghana,

the Dashiki and Agbada from West Africa, the Basotho Blankets from Lesotho etc. By selecting and merging the distinctive aspects of different cultures, it has unintentionally reinforced the existing perception people have on these African cultures, which are built upon all these aspects, which goes contrary to popular beliefs that this is a movie to empower Blacks.

The depiction of Africa and Wakanda serves to shed a different light on Africa, by portrayal them as beautiful and advanced. However, in doing so it has unintentionally reinforced existing stereotypes about Africa and Blacks.

Black Panther can be seen as a breakthrough for Hollywood film, as they are different from the conventional movies, and they attempt to provide a platform for their audience to understand more about Blacks and their ancestry. However, much more can be done and needs to be done to the five areas of distorted Black representation in media, and Black Panther serves as a starting point for this.

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