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Pop Culture, Perceptions, and Social Change (A Research Review)

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WILL & GRACE

XENA

Sabrina *The Teenage Witch*

Acknowledgements

Introduction

A white woman is at far greater risk of violence from a white man than a black man[1]—and yet white women are more likely to lock their door or flinch at the sight of a black man than a white man. Why? Despite our society's embrace of egalitarian values, stereotypes about different racial and ethnic groups remain powerful. So a black man is "seen" as potentially dangerous, or his profession is presumed to be an athlete or entertainer rather than a doctor, lawyer, or teacher.[2] An Asian-American woman is "seen" as deferential, and an Asian-American man as skilled in math, but socially awkward. In our current political climate, many who appear Latino or of Middle-Eastern descent are presumed to be non-citizens: the ultimate exclusion.[3] And outside of historical caricatures, Native Americans are often not seen at all.[4] Rarely are these stereotypes a result of actual experience; instead, they are pervasive assumptions that exist within our culture.

Because these stereotypes are linked to American culture, we are interested in the possible role of popular culture in disrupting them and introducing more authentic and accurate portrayals of people of color and immigrants. **In this report, we review a targeted group of academic studies and research reports to determine the empirical support for the hypotheses that: (1) popular culture can be an effective instrument for positive social change; and (2) popular culture can be harnessed in the effort to challenge stereotypes and improve attitudes and behavior toward immigrants and people of color.** We focus narrowly on race, ethnicity, and attitudes toward immigrants because while other identity categories— gender, LGBTQ status, disability—are often linked to discrimination and stigma, they are mediated through direct relationships within families, households, and neighborhoods. In contrast, with respect to race and ethnicity, in light of continued patterns of residential and other forms of segregation, **popular culture is often the primary source of information people have about other racial or ethnic groups.[5]**

Why Popular Culture?

When we think about popular culture, we probably imagine the images, stories, and products that represent our culture: what is "trending" online, the biggest hit songs, or the television shows that everyone is talking about. These are all examples of pop culture, but popular culture is more than just these cultural products— it is a phenomenon that reflects our values and arises from our active engagement with it. In this *#PopJustice* report series, we define pop culture as *those elements of culture capable of sustaining and perpetuating themselves based on endorsement and participation by large groups of people through their own agency.*

Generally, the largest media of pop culture—television, film, music, the internet—serve as cultural expressions and major forms of entertainment. But the agentic nature of pop culture also makes it a powerful force—it reflects our culture, and we also use it to define our culture. Accordingly, this volume examines whether this force can be harnessed to effect social change. Drawing upon the work of experts in media impact, we conceptualize social change as an improvement in the state of affairs around a social issue, at the individual, group, system, or institutional level.[6]

Through our examination of academic articles and organizational reports, we found empirical support for the hypotheses that popular culture has the potential to be a powerful agent for change generally and that it can improve public opinion and behavior toward stigmatized groups. However, the existing evidence cannot fully explain how the change process works, or what methods will lead to the greatest social impact. It is clear that more targeted and sophisticated research is required, and that we need complementary methods of social action to transmit information.

The hypothesis that popular culture has potential to serve as an effective agent of change is based primarily on two essential characteristics: **it is dynamically expressive, and it is accessible. Popular culture acts both as a means for us to have enjoyable and emotional experiences with characters, places, things, or situations that we may not otherwise experience—perhaps because they are not even real—and a means for us to define our social reality.**[7] In that latter capacity, it molds group and individual identities by illustrating behavioral norms, social boundaries, and displaying rituals that define the group.[8] It further serves a pedagogical function, providing a conduit for meaning formation and knowledge acquisition.[9] In other words, **popular culture plays a key role in determining how we define our own and other identity groups.**

Construction of identity groups translates into the identification of "ingroups" (groups of people with a shared identity or interest) and "outgroups" (those whose identity is seen as different from the ingroup).[10] Interactions between particular identity groups are referred to as "intergroup" dynamics. Popular culture is often foundational to the identification of which groups are considered "ingroups" and which are considered "outgroups" within a particular society.[11]

The features of popular culture only become more powerful when paired with accessibility. Unlike "classical" forms of culture, which are often felt to be created for and enjoyed by the elite, popular culture by definition has been an inviting place for a broad audience to pursue knowledge and to make or find meaning.[12] Moreover, because we understand pop culture to be shared territory, we are more inclined to believe that its cues for collective identity are reliable and are more willing to use those cues in our relations with peers.[13]

The second hypothesis, that popular culture may be harnessed as a means to improve public opinion of and behavior toward immigrants and people of color, is rooted in two separate but related premises—both of which are supported by empirical evidence. The first is that **popular culture has been a powerful vehicle in the creation of the (too often) negative public opinions toward immigrants and people of color.**[14] Pop culture plays a significant role in creating and perpetuating negative cultural stereotypes, as well as making them salient and readily available.[15] These stereotypes inform public opinion, shape our perceptions of others, and most importantly, affect behavior toward immigrants and other people of color. The second premise is that **more authentic depictions can increase positive perceptions of immigrants and people of color** (both of whom are still often considered "outgroups" in the United States by the dominant culture) ultimately decrease the level of discrimination,[16] and can improve perceptions about outgroups more broadly.[17]

We have focused primarily on pop culture dynamics in the United States, but in this review, we also look to social psychological research from other countries. The social psychological research suggests that while cultural differences are often salient, there are also important areas of overlap in the relationships between human groups.[18] The primary differences between societies tend to be which identity groups are dominant—and which characteristics (race, ethnicity, religion, for example) are considered salient along as the stereotypes that are associated with those identity characteristics. The dynamics between dominant and nondominant groups usually follow similar patterns.
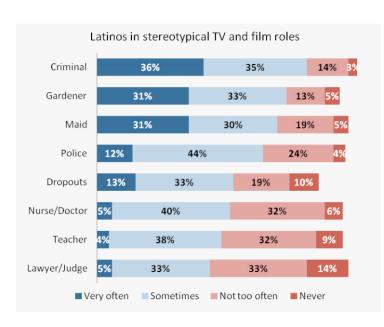
As we describe below, there is an overwhelming body research demonstrating that popular culture has contributed significantly to the creation and perpetuation of negative stereotypes about immigrants and people of color, and that these negative stereotypes have had significant costs to these communities and to our country more generally. But popular culture does not have to continue to serve this role. It can also be a catalyst to challenging the dominant norms.[19] One possible outcome of this report—and the work we hope will follow—will be the increased assessment of the potential benefits of ceasing to perpetuate negative stereotypes, as well as the creation and promotion of pop culture content that more authentically portrays immigrants and people of color. Once these benefits are measured, they can become part of the calculus, along with purely financial success, of whether to create particular content.
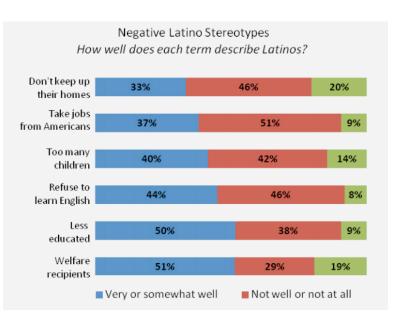
Pop Culture's Representation of Immigrants and People of Color

Historically, popular culture has tended to underrepresent, marginalize, and caricature members of nondominant racial and ethnic groups.[20] They tend to be depicted within several different formulaic tropes rather than as fully developed, unique characters.[21] Negative depictions of people of color have been shown to induce feelings of hostility and to influence policy preferences.[22]

With respect to immigrants, public opinion is generally divided, but as contrasted with race, overt hostility continues to be considered reasonably acceptable and behavior that is harmful to immigrants is tolerated. Indeed, according to the Pew Research Center, the Obama administration deported a record 438,421 unauthorized immigrants in fiscal year 2013, continuing a streak of stepped-up enforcement that has resulted in more than 2 million deportations since President Obama took office.[23]

Many people in the United States lack direct interaction with immigrants, and there is a strong association between immigrants and Latinos. As such, it is instructive to consider the overlap between stereotypes about and media depictions of Latinos.[24] If Latinos are commonly depicted as criminals, gardeners, and maids as compared to lawyers, judges, teachers, and nurses or doctors, it is not surprising that many in America hold stereotypical views—presuming, for example, that Latinos are poorly educated or are likely welfare recipients. Below, we examine these stereotypes, drawing from a study conducted by the National Hispanic Media Coalition.[25] The first chart examines the roles of Latino characters in television and film, and the second chart shows the extent to which Americans agree with stereotypes about Latinos. These data complement other research, which has found that overall television viewing is linked with greater endorsement of negative stereotypes about Latinos.[26]

Latinos in stereotypical TV and film roles

Role	Very often	Sometimes	Not too often	Never
Criminal	36%	35%	14%	3%
Gardener	31%	33%	13%	5%
Maid	31%	30%	19%	5%
Police	12%	44%	24%	4%
Dropouts	13%	33%	19%	10%
Nurse/Doctor	5%	40%	32%	6%
Teacher	4%	38%	32%	9%
Lawyer/Judge	5%	33%	33%	14%

Negative Latino Stereotypes
How well does each term describe Latinos?

Term	Very or somewhat well	Not well or not at all	
Don't keep up their homes	33%	46%	20%
Take jobs from Americans	37%	51%	9%
Too many children	40%	42%	14%
Refuse to learn English	44%	46%	8%
Less educated	50%	38%	9%
Welfare recipients	51%	29%	19%

Source: Baretto & Saguera, The Impact of Media Stereotypes on Opinions and Attitudes Towards Latinos (National Hispanic Media Coalition, 2012)

One way to examine the representation of immigrants and people of color in the media is through *content analysis*. In this process, researchers identify salient categories—here, immigrants or people of color—and then count over a set period or periods of time how many times a character from the group is shown.[27] As Downing and colleagues (2005) describe, content analysis allows researchers to track the level of media coverage of people of color—whether they are covered frequently, typically rendered invisible, or whether there are spikes and lulls in coverage. Researchers can also look more deeply, to understand the nature of the coverage. They can assess the "frequency with which people of color [are] associated in the media with immigrant or refugee status, violence, crime, disease, unemployment, welfare abuse, as opposed to being covered as everyday citizens of all sorts and conditions."[28] Analysis of media content does not need to be constant in order to provide a clear picture of coverage; instead, statistically random sampling of media is a useful proxy.[29] When content analysis is done well, it can be very useful to look deeply at particular frames and the ways different people and social issues are portrayed. At its best, it is not simply a research method that counts whether or if people of color (or any relevant social issue) are covered at all, but *how* they are covered. For instance, a recent content analysis of 345 television shows airing from 1987 to 2009 reveals "severe underrepresentation of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, and a tendency to depict ethnic minorities stereotypically."[30]

The representation of immigrants and people of color in popular culture generate and perpetuate stereotypes of these groups. The presence of these stereotypes in media is important not only because they are hurtful, limiting, and inaccurate, but also because **racial and ethnic portrayals in media become integrated into consumers' mental representations of these groups.**[31] Scientists know that stereotypes play a crucial role in our neurological functioning—how our brains process stimuli. Through socialization, our brains have created visual and aural categories (or schemas, to use the scientific phrase) for most of the sights we see and sounds we hear.[32] This process is referred to as "implicit social cognition."[33] Our brains use categories for people as well as objects: based upon visual and aural cues, we make automatic judgments about what category a particular person fits within, and we often act on those judgments.[34] Categories of people by ethnicity, race, national origin, or gender morph into generalized stereotypes about them.

And even if we think they are inaccurate or problematic, these **stereotypes have a substantial influence on how we behave towards others.** Our unconscious or "implicit" stereotypes cause us to make assumptions (both negative and positive) about people based upon superficial characteristics.[35] Research shows that these implicit assumptions and stereotypes actually influence our behavior towards groups, more so than even the conscious attitudes we have about them.[36]

Sometimes our psychological distinction between ingroups and outgroups may be so strong that we narrow our understanding of and relationship to the outgroup—specifically, research shows that people can fail to attribute the full range of emotions to people from other racial or ethnic groups.[37] Primary emotions such as pleasure, fear, and rage are understood to be experienced by both human and nonhuman animals, while "secondary" emotions such as mourning, admiration, resentment, and hope are believed be experienced exclusively by humans.[38] Goff and colleagues (2008) state that because these secondary emotions are an important part of what makes us "human," denial of secondary emotions to outgroup members constitutes a form of dehumanization.[39] Other researchers describe this phenomenon as "infrahumanization" and note that it includes ascribing greater intelligence[40] and language competency[41] to ingroups.[42] These processes of de- and infrahumanization play out when we watch people from different racial and ethnic groups interact through pop culture.

"We need to look to neuroscience to understand exactly how we can move the needle. Knowing how many people have watched isn't enough anymore, we need to know how they perceived and experienced what they watched."

Monica Gil
SVP, Multi-Cultural Strategies, Nielsen

The research shows that failing to recognize people as fully human—not surprisingly—has a range of harmful effects. Those who recognized fewer human emotions in black people were less willing to provide help to victims of Hurricane Katrina.[43] Police officers who dehumanized black people were more likely to use excessive force against black boys.[44]

Related research in neuroscience has shown that **people have a tendency to display less empathy to people of other races than their own** using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) studies measuring the level of activity in the amygdala (an area of the brain that mediates pain). In a 2009 study, researchers showed participants video clips of faces contorted to reflect the experience of pain. When participants viewed pictures of people of their same ethnicity experiencing pain, the fMRI documented high activity levels in the relevant brain region, but the activity level dropped when they viewed clips of outgroup members experiencing pain.[45] A similar study used transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to measure corticospinal activity level in participants who were shown short video clips of a needle entering into the hand of either a white or black person.[46] As with the fMRI study, researchers here found that region-specific brain activity levels are higher when a white participant viewed the clip of a white person experiencing pain than when a white participant saw a clip of a black person experiencing pain. These studies illustrate the differences in our deeply-rooted empathetic response to others based on their ingroup or outgroup status.

Neither implicit bias nor the neural reaction to the pain of particular outgroups is inherent or universal—both are deeply linked to the relative status and perceived worth of different racial groups.[47] The combination of implicit negative associations with people of color and ingroup preferences among whites are remnants of our country's hardened racial categories and pervasive racialized and nativist associations. However, many of us recognize the harm caused by negative stereotypes and wish to do away with racial and ethnic discrimination. We have to remember that we are not consigned to behave and respond to stereotypes that are contrary to our conscious beliefs and values. As a society and individually, we can align our behavior to conform to egalitarian beliefs rather than remain stuck in racial hierarchies. For this change to occur, a dramatic shift will be required in our associations with racial and ethnic groups. Popular culture appears to be a crucial vehicle for such a shift.

Exploring the Research on Popular Culture

To prepare this volume, we examined a wide range of research related to popular culture. Within the academic literature, we reviewed the literature from a variety of fields:

- Media Psychology (which uses the theories, concepts and methods of psychology to study the impact of the mass media and technology on individuals, groups, and cultures);

- Social Psychology (which is concerned with three central themes: the normative power of the group, the centrality of subjective meaning or interpretation, and the significance of experimental research);

- Mass Media & Communications Studies (which uses the methods of communications research in analyzing how the content of media sent to large segments of the population at the same time persuades or otherwise affects the behavior, attitude, opinion, or emotion of the person or people receiving it);

- Pop Culture Studies (a division of cultural and critical studies assessing the many different ways people use, interpret, and adapt to conventional mass-produced items and how expressive practices in that context convey, challenge, and influence social values, norms of behavior, and senses of identity);

- Public Health Communications (which considers the role of different interventions to increase health and limit the spread of disease).

The academic literature on popular culture in general is vast; however, it has important limitations for our inquiry. First, as the list above illustrates, it is segmented and spans several disciplines, making it difficult to synthesize and translate into an applied context. Second, much of the research is limited in the ability to extrapolate to broader "pop culture" since individual studies are generally studying one individual phenomenon found in one particular medium (TV, film, etc.). Despite these limitations, this literature lays an important foundation for what we know about the potential for popular culture to serve as a vehicle for social change.

Beyond academia, the research reports from allied organizations hew more closely to the issue of the role of media in social change, but often, they focus on documentary film or news media other than popular culture (as this report defines that term). Accordingly, for purpose of this review, we identify the scholarship that responds to the broader question of the degree to which popular culture has been shown to effect social change and highlight the smaller body of work that focuses on immigrants and others in stigmatized identity groups. We also draw from the excellent research reports from allied organizations when their conclusions or insights have salience to our particular questions.

Of particular utility for purposes of this report is the "mapping of research methods" developed by the Center for Social Media Impact,[48] which describes the different qualitative and quantitative research methods that have been used to study media impact and media content. We reproduce their map below:

MAPPING THE RESEARCH METHODS: DOCUMENTARY IMPACT

Qualitative and quantitative research methods used to study media impact vary depending upon the research question and type of media impact (and media content) in question. Most media impact research is based on one of these underlying methods from foundational media effects research:[49]

AUDIENCE SURVEY	**What It Does:** Examines individuals' perspectives (attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, behavior) associated with media exposure; can be used to assess short-term and long-term effects depending on exact research design. **Limitations:** This quantitative approach does not show the impact of a media project on media discourse (media content) about a social topic or media project.
CONTENT ANALYSIS	**What It Does:** Examines the presence of particular portrayals or frames in media content; can be used to examine media content and portrayals at one time or over a long time period (i.e., to examine shifts or trends) in order to show the impact of a media project on the public agenda and media discourse around an issue. **Limitations:** As a quantitative content study approach, it does not examine the ways in which audiences and individuals respond to a media project.
EXPERIMENT	**What It Does:** Examines audience response to a particular type of content or portrayal compared to another, can establish the impact of directly experiencing one media project vs. experiencing a different one, or experiencing a media project vs. not experiencing it at all. **Limitations:** Quantitative laboratory conditions and lab-produced media content are not always fully reflective of a real-world experience with media (with some exceptions).
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS	**What They Do:** Gather nuanced qualitative data about audience response or attitudes about media portrayals of particular content and topics; this approach does not offer numerical conclusions, but the methods can also reveal nuances that are not yielded from multiple-choice (quantitative) audience surveys. **Limitations**: This qualitative approach provides anecdotal and case study information about the personal impact of a media project on an individual, but it does not reveal the full numerical scope of the impact.
ETHNOGRAPHY	**What It Does:** Reveals the nuanced, often insider, in-depth cultural norms, perspectives and behaviors of a particular group of people; researchers employ classical observation or "join" sub-groups to perform participant-observation as insiders. **Limitations:** The findings from this qualitative method are not generalizable to other groups or a wider population.

Source: Borum Chattoo, C. (2014). Assessing the Social Impact of Issue-Focused Documentaries: Research Methods & Future Considerations. The Center for Media & Social Impact Report.

We focused most of our review on research using the experimental method, since we are hoping to determine whether there is a direct link between particular media content and changes in audience perceptions. This focus is not intended to underestimate the importance of community engagement and movement-building in effecting social change. Rather, we keep our attention targeted on pop culture's role in social change—specifically its link to negative stereotypes about immigrants and people of color—in line with our stated hypotheses.

Popular Culture as a Potentially Effective Agent of Social Change

The direct examination of popular culture as an agent of social change is a nascent field, but existing insights suggest substantial potential for popular culture to serve this function. Various forms of research in a wide variety of fields support the conclusion that popular culture has a unique capacity to disseminate facts in an entertaining way,[50] to generate emotion[51] and empathy,[52] and to provide exemplars for group identity formation[53] that translate into a potentially powerful vehicle to achieve social change. Moreover, the ability to reach wide audiences is a unique feature of popular culture[54] that bolsters its potential for impact at the societal level. In this section, we review evidence supporting this claim, drawing upon insights from the field of entertainment education, social cognitive theory, narratives, and media comparison studies.

Popular culture has unique characteristics that make it an influential force in society. For one, **popular culture has the potential to connect people on an emotional level.** Entertainment content is designed to trigger emotions within the audience, and research shows that emotions are more likely to engender empathy than other forms of communication.[55] As such, popular culture can serve as a vehicle to increase empathy across racial and ethnic lines, particularly in communities where opportunities for interaction are rare. In addition, **popular culture has the ability to portray people of various racial and ethnic groups in their full humanity—with the hope of increasing recognition of our shared humanity.** One way to utilize popular culture for social change is the reductionist approach: instead of portraying immigrants and people of color as "bad," popular culture should be introducing only "good" characters. However, this negative/positive binary ignores the importance of representing people in their full humanity. Instead, researchers suggest the concept of how different groups are "framed" as a prompt to explore how representation affects "the long-term impact on audiences' definitions of social reality"[56]—for instance, "minority-ethnic audiences who find themselves systematically excluded except in repetitive and limiting news scenarios, or majority-ethnic audiences, with only superficial work contacts at best with people of color, who draw their perspectives on themselves as well as on people of color largely from these frames."[57]

Many of the examples of the social utility of popular culture come from "entertainment education"—media with an entrenched educational message, which aims to alter the audience's attitudes and behaviors in a positive way. Entertainment education has been used globally to shift attitudes related to issues such as women's empowerment, economic development, and domestic violence.[58] Most notably, entertainment education has long been an effective and widely used strategy in the field of public health through health communication on topics such as tobacco use, HIV prevention, and hand washing.[59] Entertainment education attempts to change people's beliefs about their ability to successfully engage in positive behaviors and by "providing vicarious practice in carrying out a desired behavior"[60] through witnessing it on screen. The method of entertainment education is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory,[61] which asserts that we acquire knowledge and skills through observing social models.

Education media—and popular culture more broadly—can be an effective tool for social change because, again drawing on social cognitive theory, it engages the audience through identification and provides opportunities for indirect contact. Actors serve as social models for behavior change; the more the audience identifies with and relates to these models, the more likely they are to receive and engage with the messages built into the content.[62] In addition, the **interpersonal interactions between actors serve as a form of "indirect" contact for the audience.** Murrar and Brauer explain,[63]

> "[Viewers] may observe ingroup members interact with outgroup members (vicarious contact[64]), they may be exposed to—and form beliefs about—outgroup members who are not necessarily shown in the presence of ingroup members (parasocial contact[65]), or they may imagine themselves interacting with members of the outgroup (imagined contact[66])."

When these forms of contact are positive,[67] or occur with likable or esteemed members of the outgroup,[68] they improve people's attitudes towards the outgroup. Through this contact, pop culture can shape the audience's perceptions of others, specifically people of color and immigrants.

Moreover, entertainment education has been successful, researchers conclude, because it relies upon a storytelling approach.[69] In fact, **the narrative nature of most forms of popular culture is the critical characteristic for effecting change in the minds and behaviors of the audience.** Indeed, academics have compared the effectiveness of interventions that incorporate aspects of pop culture—specifically, using narrative—against those that do not, finding that the former can have a greater impact on attitudes. A small number of studies report similar results when comparing narrative film and fictional stories to non-narrative presentations of the same facts.[70] In fact, as Chattoo and colleagues contended in a comparison study of *Stand Up Plant*, an hour-long comedic travelogue documentary TV program about the effects of global poverty, and *The End Game*, a sober journalistic format on related issues: "a strongly-held emotion is highly motivating, whether it's sadness or happiness or fear. But narrative involvement (level of transportation into the story) is the key, given that it may break down cognitive barriers that bolster viewers' resistance to argument or persuasion."[71] Moreover, when presented with entertainment education, as opposed to advertising or PSA messages, the viewer has less of a sense of being "sold" something,[72] so they are more receptive to the pro-social messages embedded in the narrative.[73]

In addition to being a vehicle for education and individual behavior change, popular culture can also be seen as leading to social change by eliciting greater political or civic interest. Jeffrey Jones examined talk shows such as Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* and concluded that the combination of humor and representation of "ordinary citizens" led the program's audiences to show an investment in issues of public life and affinity towards their civic community.[74] Kevin Barnhurst contends that young people use "commercials and magazine ads, fictional TV shows and films, and sports or gaming to give form to their dreams, personal and collective, and ... to create their own styles and express themselves as political beings."[75]

However, the literature examining the effects of movies related to climate change raise important issues for those hoping to rely upon film to achieve social change objectives. Numerous researchers have examined the impact of the 2004 climate change disaster film, *The Day After Tomorrow*, which was a box office success. Anthony Leiserowitz asserts that the film was found "to have a significant impact on climate change risk perceptions, conceptual models, behavioral intentions, policy priorities, and even voting intentions of moviegoers."[76] However, the movie did not shift the general public's view of climate change.[77] A team of researchers found that some audiences felt that the extreme impacts shown in the film were science fiction and thus not believable.[78] Sakellari performed a meta-analysis of the studies of the film and concluded that: "Overall, the results indicate a plurality of different 'audiences', with differences in cultural, social, and political perceptions of risk and climate change, but in more general terms, the film did increase awareness and concern about the potential effects of climate change and had positive, although short-lived, effects on willingness to act."[79] The author concludes that the film's failure to inspire trust and its reliance upon fear limited its ability to shift behaviors among audience members.[80] *The Day After Tomorrow* provides a useful case study regarding the balancing between captivating an audience and disseminating information.

Can Popular Culture Interventions Counter Stereotypes and Improve Attitudes and Behavior Toward Immigrants and People of Color?

As we note above, the research is robust that establishes the media's significant role in characterizing the identities of racial and ethnic groups, and in defining categories such as "immigrant." However, we identified far fewer studies of whether positive images in popular culture improve public opinion toward these marginalized groups, and even fewer that evaluate the mechanisms that lead to change or what specifically makes content effective in altering and improving perceptions of outgroups. Nevertheless, the research to date provides strong support for the potential for the various modes of popular culture to contribute to changing perceptions and attitudes of immigrants and people of color.[81] For example, Mastro and Tukachinsky found that exposing participants to images of Jimmy Smits, a well-liked Latino actor, improved participants' perceptions of Latinos as a group in "several commonly stereotyped domains including work ethic, intelligence, and criminality."[82] And though studies involving exposure to positive exemplars have not yet been found to have long-term effects, short-term change is a necessary prerequisite for long-term change.[83]

We explored the research regarding numerous forms of pop culture, from television to literary fiction, focusing primarily on experimental studies that examined impact on attitudes. In some cases, the studies directly examined attitudes toward people of color, while others simply give us insight regarding outgroups. We have summarized the evidence, below, based on type of media.

Television

Television has the potential to be an especially effective medium for changing public opinion because viewers both see and hear the characters[84]—by providing the appearance and the language of the characters to the viewer, television series can undermine stereotypes that may exist in one's imagination. In addition, television is a powerful medium because it elicits an emotional response to fictional characters. Scholars have conducted a range of studies analyzing how this feature might be exploited to produce more positive perceptions of marginalized groups. Some of this work evolved as an outgrowth of "intergroup contact" theory, which posits that positive contact with people from other groups can reduce prejudice.[85] In 1956, Horton and Wohl introduced the notion of "parasocial interaction" to suggest that communication media can provide viewers with "an apparently intimate, face-to-face association with a performer."[86] These theories serve as the backbone of a body of research examining the influence of fictional characters on viewers' attitudes toward outgroups. Researchers conclude that **viewers may process media experiences similarly to how they process direct experiences, so the consumption of media may have similar effects to actually engaging in interpersonal interactions.**[87]

Schiappa and colleagues drew upon the notion of parasocial interaction to examine whether television shows with gay male characters would lead to the audience having more positives attitudes toward and beliefs about them.[88] Using experimental and longitudinal methods, the researchers studied several well-known television shows, including NBC's *Will & Grace*, HBO's *Six Feet Under*, and Bravo's *Queer Eye for a Straight Guy*. In their study of the effects of *Will & Grace*, Schiappa and colleagues found that repeated exposure to the show increased viewer involvement with the characters and correlated with lower levels of prejudice toward gay men.[89] Of note, the researchers found that the reduction in prejudice was strongest for participants with few or no gay acquaintances, and that there was no reduction for participants with three or more gay friends[90] because, they assert, the real-life intergroup contact had "done its job already."[91] The study of *Six Feet Under* was conducted in class sessions over a full semester, in which participants watched a full season of the show, and led to the conclusion that: "when parasocial contact is of sufficient quantity and quality to allow the sort of judgments to be made about mass mediated characters that people make with direct interpersonal contact, prejudicial attitudes may be reduced." [92] In the final study, participants watched three episodes of *Queer Eye for a Straight Guy* for a total of 135 minutes and again, reported reduced prejudice and changed beliefs about gay men.

One experimental study raises important questions regarding the representation of intergroup interactions. Joyce and Harwood exposed white participants to a televised depiction of an interaction between a white border patrol agent and a Latino undocumented immigrant.[93] The depiction differed in the degree to which the interaction was negative or positive—and the degree to which the positivity flowed from the Latino character. When participants viewed the clip that depicted a positive interaction, they were more favorable to Latinos and immigrants more generally; when the interaction was negative, the attitudes flipped.

Joyce and Harwood reach a series of conclusions directed toward content creators based upon this and related studies. First, they assert that **television shows should include interactions between different racial and ethnic groups rather than only creating shows featuring single groups**. This conclusion is in line with intergroup contact theory, the role of social modeling, and the experience of indirect contact, as we discussed earlier. The authors also note that their study highlights the risks of leaving negative interactions between groups unresolved because individuals with negative expectations about intergroup dynamics (due to past negative experiences, for example) are vulnerable to disproportionate negative effects of new negative contact. If they witness a negative interaction that is not adequately addressed, it may only serve to reinforce existing stereotypes and schemas around intergroup dynamics. Finally, the authors assert that

people of color and immigrants will have to be likable to trigger positive attitudes, but that the portrayal of characters who are perceived as "atypical" of their group are unlikely to lead to generalized positive feelings toward other groups.[94]

The final conclusion of the Joyce and Harwood study highlights the importance of the nature of portrayals of immigrants and people of color in media—and the tension that exists in crafting the "best" character. While likability is essential to improving attitudes toward a group, Tukachinsky and colleagues assert that it may be a "necessary albeit insufficient condition" for generalizing the positive attributes of a character to the group as a whole.[95] To promote positive attitudes generally, research suggests that the likable character must be perceived to be typical of the group.[96] Otherwise, they may not be seen as representative of the race or ethnicity. In fact, there is a tendency for people to "exceptionalize" people from other racial or ethnic groups—seeing positive attributes or actions as unique to the individual but not relevant to overall stereotypes about the racial or ethnic group to which the person belongs.[97] Evidence suggests that this phenomenon occurs with characters as well. For instance, *The Cosby Show*, a sitcom featuring a black family, has been heralded as an exemplar in positive representation of black Americans. However, this representation may be too exceptional. From their qualitative study of white viewers, Jhally and Lewis suggest that the white viewers saw the Huxtables as "white." Essentially, they viewed the family as distinct from other black people. Therefore, "[a]lthough they [white viewers] happily welcomed the Huxtables into their homes," the authors write, "careful examination of their discussions made it clear this welcome would not be extended to all black people."[98]

Baretto and Saguera conducted a randomized national study to examine the impact of positive and negative portrayals from actual media sources on viewers' attitudes toward Latinos. The authors found that positive depictions of Latinos in a television vignette (Jimmy Smits as President on *West Wing*) increased positive associations and decreased negative stereotypes about Latinos. Interestingly, they found that a positive television news story (about astronaut José Hernandez) was even more effective in changing attitudes.[99] The impact of the news story can likely be understood by its use of a narrative framework—following Mr. Hernandez's journey from a child of a immigrant farm worker to realizing his dream of being an astronaut—and because this story fits a widely held schema regarding the use of hard work and determination to achieve the American Dream. As such, Mr. Hernandez's story is particularly compelling for a wide audience.

Moreover, a recent set of experimental studies demonstrate a reduction in prejudicial attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims after exposure to media that portrays them as likable.[100] In the first study, participants were assigned to watch six episodes either of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a Canadian sitcom about a group of Arabs living in a Canadian town, or six episodes of *Friends*, an American sitcom about six white friends living in New York City. Those who watched *Little Mosque on the Prairie* reported significantly less implicit and explicit prejudice toward Arabs, and this effect lasted through the four-week follow-up.[101] In the second study, the researchers compared an entertainment education music video featuring Muslims to two established prejudice reduction techniques (imagined contact and group malleability) and to a control condition. The music video led to a significant reduction in prejudice, more so than the other methods—participants in this condition reported greater warmth toward and liking of Muslims, and rated them more positively on multiple traits.[102] In both studies, level of identification with the Arab or Muslim characters was a key factor in prejudice reduction. The authors assert that these media were effective because they transported the viewers into "a world in which they identify with, understand, and become involved with members of the outgroup."[103]

Finally, a recent study seems to provide direct support for the hypothesis that the representation of people of color in television impacts the public's attitudes toward them. Tukachinsky and colleagues conducted a thorough content analysis of primetime television shows airing from 1987-2009, then juxtaposed the representation of racial and ethnic minorities with national public opinion surveys from the same time period.[104] The researchers found a relationship between media portrayals and whites' attitudes toward blacks and Latinos in the U.S. Specifically, the prevalence of hypersexualized black and Latino characters was associated with more negative attitudes toward blacks and Latinos. But as blacks and Latinos on television occupied higher social and professional status, whites had more positive attitudes toward them.

While the authors cannot make any statement about causation, their work emphasizes the importance of portrayals of people of color in the media, as well as the close link between popular culture and public opinion.

Film

While the gap between film and television has narrowed considerably, film has historically been a place where more complex ideas, greater risk-taking, and higher production values can emerge. These features can generate emotional responses among viewers that might enhance the effects of interventions, particularly those attempting to tackle difficult subject matter.*

Emerging evidence suggests that film has the potential to be an effective medium for changing popular opinion toward immigrants and people of color.[105] For instance, in an attempt to increase interest in social and political issues in Turkish college students, Kennedy, Senses, and Ayan[106] used three movies as teaching tools. The authors argue that using movies as teaching tools is effective because it enhances students' interest, is practical, and under most circumstances, is engaging. During different semesters, students watched one of three films and then wrote an essay integrating the theory they had learned in class with the movie content. The qualitative results suggest that *A Short Film about Killing*, *Ten*, and *Hotel Rwanda*, were effective in encouraging students to reflect on capital punishment, women's issues, and prejudice, respectively.

In fact, Shih and colleagues specifically examined the impact of film on attitudes toward outgroups.[107] The researchers used a 3-minute excerpt from *The Joy Luck Club* in a series of experiments, in which they showed participants the clip with differing instructions, some directed towards intergroup empathy and perspective-taking. The researchers found that **taking the perspective of an outgroup member (in this case, an Asian-American group) not only improved attitudes towards the outgroup, but also reduced prejudice and discriminatory behavior against other specific individual members of that outgroup.** The researchers highlight the role of empathy in generating the viewers' positive attitudes, further reinforcing the notion that the emotional connection of parasocial interactions mirrors that of real-life interactions. This study suggests a promising opportunity for film to impact popular opinion toward outgroup individuals.

Radio

While we may assume that visual representations of outgroups are critical to attitudinal change, fictional narrative communicated through radio has been found to reduce prejudice and increase empathy in areas in which the radio is a common form for mass media.[108] Three studies, each in Africa, demonstrate the potential for narrative to have powerful effects on attitudes.

Ten years after the Rwandan genocide, a researcher teamed up with a local nongovernmental organization to conduct a randomized field experiment that assessed the impact of a yearlong "education entertainment" radio soap opera.[109] Communities either listened to a soap opera about reconciliation, aimed to influence beliefs about intergroup prejudice, mass violence, and trauma, or a soap opera about health, focused particularly on AIDS. The researcher found that in both groups, the experience of listening to the drama on a monthly basis over one year led to statistically significant effects in listeners' perceptions of social norms. Of note, listeners in the reconciliation group expressed changed norms about intergroup interaction, and displayed more prosocial behaviors during qualitative analysis. All listeners expressed empathy for the

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* In this review, we do not include the significant literature focusing on documentary films; this work has been thoroughly described elsewhere (see: Center for Media & Social Impact report, *Assessing the Social Impact of Issue-Focused Documentaries: Research Methods & Future Considerations;* Learning for Action report, *Deepening Engagement: A Framework for Measuring Media Performance and Results*; Media Impact Project report, *Measuring Media Impact: An Overview of the Field*).

fictional soap opera characters, but in the reconciliation group, listeners also reported increased empathy for other Rwandans. Similarly, Bilali and Vollhardt also found that a radio drama had a powerful impact on increasing openness to reconciliation in Rwanda.[110]

The Bridge Project's *Malawi Radio Diaries* program was created to address the stigma associated with AIDS in Malawi, featuring people with HIV telling stories about their everyday lives.[111] Creel and colleagues empirically analyzed the impact of the initiative communities' stigma toward people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).[112] Thirty villages with ten participants each were randomized to listen to *Radio Diaries* only, to the *Radio Diaries* program followed by group discussion, or to a control program. Researchers found that the radio program reduced fear of casual contact with PLWHA. The impact on the other stigma components was less straight-forward, but one finding is particularly relevant—when examining shame regarding HIV infection, participants who listened to the *Radio Dairies* program and did not know someone with HIV reported similar levels of shame as participants in the control group who knew someone with HIV. The authors suggest that listening to the program may provide parasocial contact similar to actual contact with PLWHA.[113]

While these studies in the African context show promise regarding the impact of radio on attitudes, non-narrative information on the radio may not have similar effects. In their study of the effect of various media representations of Latinos on stereotypes, Baretto and Saguera assessed the impact of radio shows with either negative or positive portrayals of Latinos, and compared these to other types of media.[114] They found the negative talk radio to have a negative effect on listeners' attitudes (though a less powerful effect than negative portrayal on a television news show), and found a positive radio show (an interview with a Latina astronaut) to have the least effect on improving attitudes in comparison to television news or entertainment or print. These findings suggest that compared to other media, **radio may not be the most effective method for attitudinal change—yet they underscore the notion that the nature of media portrayals of people of color do matter.**

Internet

The internet is fast becoming a primary vehicle for dissemination of media. There are even certain media types that call the Internet home, such as viral videos and social media. Accordingly, we give Internet-based interventions separate treatment here, though the evaluative research on the impact of Internet-based media is sparse. User-created content on the Internet may be able to serve similar functions as scripted television series by relying on the same theoretical bases discussed above—and do so without a fraction of the budget.

Recently, Olivier and colleagues analyzed how viewing viral YouTube videos drawn from "Kid President" (an African-American child comedian who has gained fame for his motivational and inspiring videos, which have each been viewed tens of millions of times) can elicit feelings of emotional elevation that, in turn, bring about a greater sense of connection with outgroups and improve attitudes toward them.[115] The researchers found that feelings of elevation (e.g., feeling touched, moved, or inspired) in response to inspiring videos were associated with heightened feelings of overlap between the self and humanity, and this overlap was associated with greater feelings of connectedness with those from a diversity of racial/ethnic groups.[116] The researchers also report that increased connection was associated with more favorable attitudes toward these groups. **The authors suggest that eliciting an emotional response from the viewer may be an important avenue to changing popular opinion, rather than simply increasing positive portrayals or counter-stereotypical examples.**

Even websites have been found to increase positive views. Mastro and Tukachinsky found that participants who were shown a modified version of a popular entertainment website describing a family sitcom and with the synopsis that the show was an *Everybody Loves Raymond*-style program about the "… loving … devoted … Martinez family (including the extended family)" resulted in more positive views of Latinos with respect to work ethic, intelligence, and criminality. Even though the show only referred to a single, favorable

stereotype associated with Latinos (i.e., family values), "this positivity spilled over from one domain to others."[117] Mastro and Tukachinsky conclude by repeating the call from other scholars that: **"the repeated pairing of racial/ethnic groups with favorable attributes in the media may create novel, implicit positive associations; ultimately producing long-term attitude change."[118]**

Music

Music exposure has been shown to have powerful effects on human behavior.[119] When considering the role of popular culture's effect on social change more broadly, including the capacity to mobilize political action, we see that music is often a catalyst to social movements.[120] However, as with other forms of popular culture, popular music has also been home to stereotypes about the identity of people of color.[121]

Research provides some support for the notion that music exposure may have a positive effect on social change. In a study by Zillmann and colleagues,[122] white participants were more supportive of African-American candidates in a mock student government election after they were exposed to music videos featuring political rap. Greitemeyer and Schwab extended this work to explore the effect of songs with pro-integration (relative to neutral) lyrics. Focusing on attitudes and behavior toward Turks among German and Austrian college students, they found that **participants who listened to the pro-integration music expressed lower levels of prejudice against, less aggression, and greater willingness to be more helpful toward an outgroup member.**[123] These effects occurred regardless of whether the participant liked the song or otherwise experienced changes in mood.

Studies of whether popular music has the potential to decrease negative opinions of immigrants and people of color are only beginning, and the research has yet to determine whether positive effects will last beyond the short term. However, Greitemeyer and Schwab suggest in real life, when people listen to songs repeatedly, those with positive lyrics may have an even greater effect.[124]

Video Games

Video games, like other forms of popular culture, have potentially powerful effects on our perceptions of immigrants and people of color; indeed, they are perhaps most like television, sharing traits including being "dramatic storytellers, widely available, far-reaching, and often played habitually."[125] Video game content spans a wide range of virtual realities, from the land of the *Super Mario Brothers* to the puzzle board of *Candy Crush Saga*. Here we focus on the games with human portrayals, to examine the representations of racial and ethnic minorities. In a content analysis of video game magazines and game covers, researchers found that these representations typically rely upon stereotypes—often of the young, deviant, or dangerous minority male—and women of color are nearly absent.[126] According to Behm-Morawitz and Ta, these **"recurring stereotypes result in a stable set of characterizations of minorities that, though far less frequent than images of white male characters, paint a fairly consistent picture of the minority male for video game players."[127]**

While the negative portrayals of people of color in video games are well documented, there is a paucity of research examining their impact on players' attitudes. Most studies have focused on the impact of violent video games on players' aggression. From this line of research, we see that the violent nature of video games may contribute to outgroup prejudice—in fact, one study found that exposure to violent video games was linked to ethnocentrism.[128] Other researchers have demonstrated that playing violent video games increased aggressive behavior, and this effect was more pronounced when the target was an outgroup member.[129] These insights suggest that consumption of violent video games may contribute to hostility that manifests at the intergroup level.

Cooperative multiplayer games, which allow players to interact in real time, are becoming increasingly widespread and may have implications for intergroup dynamics. For instance, a recent study examined whether playing cooperatively with an outgroup player could reduce intergroup bias. The researchers found that cooperating with an outgroup partner for only 12 minutes of playing a violent video game generated large reductions in outgroup prejudice.[130] While greater examination of this phenomenon is needed, these findings suggest that the video game platform may provide an effective avenue for indirect contact with outgroup members, ultimately serving social change goals.

Of note, video games present a promising opportunity to shape attitudes because of their heavy consumption in the United States. Video games are no longer just a hobby for teenage boys—the majority of Americans (over 59%) play video games.[131] And as video gaming has expanded from computer monitors to handheld devices, it has changed the way people engage with other forms of popular culture. According to the video game industry trade group, Entertainment Software Association, 39% of gamers say they are watching less television and 40% are seeing fewer movies in theaters.[132] With this expanding market, further research is needed to understand how the popularity and accessibility of video games can be utilized to influence public opinion.

Books/Magazines/Comics (and Comic-based Animation)

In recent years, scientists have focused increasing attention on the question of whether reading narrative fiction increases empathy. Stansfield and Bunce explain, "Reading fictional stories has been found to be associated with the development of empathy in children, suggesting that there is an important link between the empathy felt for fictional characters and the ability to empathize with people in reality."[133]

Bal and Veltkamp's study compared participants who read excerpts from a literary text—a 2,750-word Sherlock Holmes story about a murder involving a shattered plaster bust of Napoleon—and those who read a nonfiction text. **A key factor in the impact of the story on empathy was "transportation"—the extent to which the reader vividly imagines scenes and characters in the story.**[134] The researchers found that the fiction readers scored higher on an empathy scale than the nonfiction readers when they felt emotionally and cognitively "transported" by the story.[135] The effect was even larger a week later. Those who were not transported, however, reported lower levels of empathy after reading the story. Stansfield and Bunce found similar results from readers of "Motholeli's Story," an extract from the novel *Morality for Beautiful Girls* by Alexander McCall Smith about the experiences of an orphaned girl in Botswana.[136] Readers who were transported reported higher levels of empathy, including warmth and compassion, as well as helping tendencies. Kidd and Castano's study reached a similar result, though they further compared literary fiction to popular fiction and nonfiction, finding that only literary fiction significantly increased empathy scores— though one could question whether their choices for literary fiction (*The Tiger's Wife*) and popular fiction (*Gone Girl*) were typical of each format.[137]

Even more pertinent to our work in this report are two studies focusing on the effect of reading fiction on bias and attitudes toward Muslims.[138] The first tested the impact of reading literary fiction on assessment of race boundaries and genetic similarity. Subjects in the experimental condition read an excerpt from *Saffron Dreams* that defies stereotypical views: the protagonist's Muslim husband is killed in the 9/11 attacks, and she is harassed by non-Muslim violent youth. The control group read a synopsis of the excerpt, devoid of descriptive prose and dialogue. Thereafter, they were shown a series of pictures of ambiguous race faces and asked them to rate them as either Arab, Caucasian, mixed but mostly Arab, or mixed but mostly Caucasian. The participants who read the actual excerpt were more likely than the synopsis readers to categorize people as mixed race, rather than identifying them as either Arab or Caucasian—race became less salient for them. They also answered a question about genetic similarity between Arabs and Caucasians and perceived greater genetic overlap between the two. In a second experiment, subjects read the excerpt, the synopsis, or a separate piece about cars; then, they viewed 12 images of the ambiguous race faces expressing varying levels of anger. Those who read the excerpt did not show a bias towards marking the most angry faces as Arab, whereas the other two groups did.[139]

Some researchers have also examined the impact of comics on attitudes. Yamamura and Shin performed a statistical analysis on survey data completed by adult Koreans regarding their anime-watching (a form of Japanese animation closely linked to Japanese comic books known as manga) habits and their interactions with Japanese people.[140] They found that the more frequently adult Koreans view Japanese animation, the more they are likely to accept Japanese people as colleagues at work, and there was marginal support that they would be more likely to accept them as neighbors and as close kin by marriage. In a similar vein, Nichols designed an animated comic aimed at reducing HIV stigma—the storylines depicted a high school aged HIV-positive male character who struggles with his status with his peers, and a college-aged HIV-positive female character who reveals her illness to her roommates and her love interest.[141] In a small study of young men who have sex with men, Nichols found that the group that viewed the animated comic experienced a significant decrease in stigmatizing attitudes about HIV transmission and infection.

Examples of Emerging Metrics and Research Projects

Thought leaders and practitioners in the field of social impact media—many of whom focus on documentaries in addition to or instead of popular culture—are in active dialogue seeking to identify the most effective mechanisms to measure and assess social impact. The following are illustrative projects that are being developed in response to the demand for metrics of success as well as the need for deeper and more nuanced understanding.

CoMTI Model

Deisner and colleagues have proposed a multiple platform CoMTI (content, medium, target, and impact) model designed to supplement the traditional metrics with social networks and the content of information associated with network members.[142] The CoMTI model relies upon a combination of social network analysis and text mining, applied to data from social media, news coverage, interviews, and ground truth about documentaries and a new technology, ConText, which is a tool to analyze both text and network data.

Harmony Institute Projects

StoryPilot[143] is an interactive platform for exploring the social impact of films through a multidimensional analysis toolkit. StoryPilot considers context, and clusters multiple films around a given social issue to create new standards for systemic analysis. StoryPilot uses data analytics to measure different facets of social change, including policy change, issue awareness, and social media trend setting.

Currently, Heidi Boisvert is conducting research as a media impact fellow at Harmony Institute to examine how interactive web, game-based, and immersive pop culture experiences employing emerging technology can more effectively foster empathy. As part of her project, she will examine case studies of successful examples of "empathetic engagement" within games, transmedia and interactive storytelling, virtual reality, immersive theatre, locative media, and more.

The Participant Index

The Participant Index (TPI) is a media-impact research system from Participant Media that attempts to examine the social impact of particular pieces of entertainment on its audience. The TPI relies upon three sources of data: social media conversations, viewership information, and audience opinion data. Its goal is to assess "what an audience learns (knowledge), feels (attitudes) and does (behaviors and actions)" in response to viewing a piece of entertainment. The methodology and approach was developed and tested in 2013 by Participant Media's Social Action & Advocacy Division, in consultation with market researchers and university collaborators, including the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP), the American University School of Communication Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), and SmithGeiger, LLC. Participant Media published the first two market reports in 2014.[144]

The TPI is an example of a metric that relies upon existing data about viewership and social media and combines that data with explicit responses from audience members completing a survey immediately after viewing the entertainment. The TPI combines its three data sources into a single "rank."

Video4Change Impact Pathways

Video4Change is a network of organizations who use videos to support social movements, document human rights violations, raise awareness about social issues, and influence social change. They are in the midst of designing an impact tool[145] that seeks to document and understand both long- and short-term impacts of video content, in a way that helps practitioners to understand and tell stories about how different activities and ways of working might or might not be contributing to the creation of the right environment or context that is needed for longer-term impact and broader social change. The short term impacts would vary, but may include informing new audiences about an issue through screening events, building the capacities of social movements through the provision of training, or mobilizing target audiences to take an action like attending a rally or signing a petition.

Entertainment Industry Market Research

The entertainment industry began compiling and analyzing data to understand audience behavior and outcomes from popular culture long before academics and social impact advocates. Indeed, industry research often forms the basis for academics and social justice activists as they seek to track, understand, and analyze the entertainment landscape. Such sources include MarketCast, Ipsos Connect, Rentrak,[146] and of course, well known to the general public since it began measuring television audiences in 1950, Nielsen (a listing of firms engaged in this research is included in #PopJustice, Volume 2: Mapping the Players).

As the media landscape becomes more complex, industry market research is becoming increasingly sophisticated, but at its most elemental level, it uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures to predict revenue and then to measure revenue. These measures include: audience size, "tracking" (to predict box office and measure effectiveness of media buying), positioning (to measure "marketability" to audiences), audience screenings (to measure "playability" of movies and TV shows and inform edits), as well as advertising research (to measure the effectiveness of commercials and movie trailers). The underlying premise is that maximum marketability (the desire to see something) combines with maximum playability (satisfaction with the entertainment experience which drives "word of mouth") to deliver hits. Because identity characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and LGBT identification are considered relevant for determining successful marketing, market research disaggregates its information by these identity characteristics. The interest convergence between industry desire to attract diverse audiences and the interest of social justice advocates to address negative associations can in some instances lead to useful collaborations.

Limitations of Measurement

In a report aptly titled "Impact with Games: A Fragmented Field,"[147] Games for Change authors describe the internal tensions within the field of those seeking to use video games for social change in even identifying what constitutes impact, much less appropriate evaluation methodologies, to determine whether a particular game succeeded in having impact. They conclude, like many other thought leaders, that breadth and flexibility are crucial—but shouldn't be used as an excuse for eschewing assessment altogether.

The challenges of measuring impact or effect are not limited to popular culture. Many of the institutions that are engaged in assessing the role of popular culture are also focused on the impact of documentaries and journalism—both of which share attributes with popular culture. As Anya Schiffrin and Ethan Zuckerman argued in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, "media is only one part of a larger ecosystem. The multitude of variables that affect any process of social change makes it hard to isolate—let alone measure— the impact of journalistic efforts."[148] The same can obviously be said about popular culture. Schiffrin and

Zuckerman reference opposition to the Vietnam War and the inspiration behind the protests that led to the Arab Spring as examples often attributed to media influence, but provide alternative structural explanations that are equally plausible. An analogy in the popular culture space is how to understand the role that Ellen DeGeneres, *Will & Grace*, *Glee*, and other popular television characters and shows have played in the changes for the LGBT community.

The Fledgling Fund, a prominent funder of social impact documentaries, released an online letter expressing concerns about various efforts that use data analytics to determine impact and assign numerical scores to convey the social impact of particular pieces of media. While the letter described the the value of compiling information available from large data sets, it questioned the utility of single numerical scores in light of a particular project's specific goals, target audience, and strategy of change as well as the worry that privileging big data may obscure the "crucial long term, off-line, grasstops and/or deeply personal impact that a project can have."[149]

Others prominent in the space have shared similar concerns. Video4Change, in a working paper released in June 2015, and Alex Kelly, in his report for the Churchill Fellowship Report, echoed the notion that numeric metrics alone will be inadequate to measure impact, in particular long-term impact.[150] Diesner and colleagues in "Computations Assessments of Social Impact Documentaries"[151] share the critiques of current models, arguing that the reliance upon big-data frequency counts combined with small-scale qualitative indicators such as focus groups or audience surveys are limited by their failure to include the role of social networks and the content of information associated with social network members.

The extant literature and methods to date are not sufficiently advanced to determine causality and as we note above, many questions remain to be answered about the mechanisms by which particular pieces of entertainment affect audience perceptions and behavior. We recommend caution in any attempts to oversimplify these questions. The components that we can easily measure—numbers of viewers, explicit audience survey outcomes, social media shares—are important, but they do not provide clear answers to the crucial questions of the degree to which particular pieces of popular culture will alter stereotypes and trigger culture change, particularly over the long term.

> *"Stories have potential to advance social change particularly if we imbed issues and ideas under the surface. But we need to drill down: identify the particular stories and the particular ways we tell stories that have the greatest impact."*
>
> **Ellen Schneider**
> *Active Voice*

Future Research

While the research on the role of popular culture in changing public views of immigrants and people of color is promising, scholars and thought leaders agree that the research is still nascent. At this point, the experimental research has looked primarily at whether a particular piece of pop culture has an effect, but the study designs haven't fully addressed why or how.

We recommend two areas of focus for future research:

- Pathways to Change
- Catalytic and Synergistic Effects

We also warn against an overly rigid expectation that change will be linear and wholly susceptible to measurement. The increasing sophistication of evaluation will allow us better to understand the potential for particular forms of popular culture to achieve movement goals, but as with any form of cultural change, the transformation of attitudes and perceptions about immigrants and people of color will be a result of a multitude of efforts.

Pathways to Change

The specific pathways through which particular forms of culture or particular stories will alter perceptions remain unclear. Many agree that further research into the neuroscience is particularly crucial. Initial forays are promising. Using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRIs) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) machines, modern scientists have successfully isolated and identified areas of the brain which respond to events in our surroundings.[152] Researchers can take pictures of participants' brains and compare what sections "light up" when completing various activities. This research is new and few studies have directly identified cognitive regions related to particular forms of media.

Cobbling together studies from across many disciplines into one of the few reviews on the neuroscience of narrative, Mar[153] speculates about areas potentially associated with story-making. He notes the role of our frontal lobe in processing information and language, as well as the activation of the right hemisphere when participants were asked to make inferences from a given set of sentences. Other researchers have similarly demonstrated the importance of this region in sense making, describing patients who suffered from right-hemisphere strokes as able to articulate sentences and complete tests but suffering from language comprehension impairment.[154]

In addition to the challenges of identifying the contours of stories that will successfully change perceptions, further work is necessary to understand the conditions that will best foster the creation of such stories. Ample evidence supports the claim that greater diversity among content creators—understood broadly to include writers, producers, and executives—is crucial to increasing the representations of immigrants and people of color, as well as other stigmatized groups in popular culture.[155] The "2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script" issued by the Bunche Center at UCLA found that shows written by diverse writers and featuring more diverse actors thrived in the market place. It may well follow that simply increasing diversity in industry will be sufficient to alter the proliferation of negative stereotypes and to introduce representation that alters those stereotypes. However, further research would be useful to confirm this assumption. (Of note, a number of organizations—academic institutions, advocacy organizations, and some creative industry labor guilds—monitor diversity and representation in Hollywood by tracking and reporting demographics, some annually, others at irregular intervals or on a one-off basis; a list of recent reports can be found in Appendix A.) In other fields, the mere presence of people from diverse groups has not been sufficient to prevent discriminatory treatment and outcomes or to increase innovation; instead, the benefits of diversity occur when the culture of the institution embraces diversity and celebrates innovation.[156]

Finally, future efforts may benefit from drawing upon what we know from existing prejudice reduction work, and examining whether popular culture can be equally effective in triggering the psychological processes that are known to reduce prejudice.[157] Research on implicit bias, for example, identifies several methods that have been effective in reducing prejudices. As one may expect from the discussion thus far, presentation of counterstereotypical exemplars is effective in minimizing negative biases toward racial/ethnic groups.[158] These sorts of depictions can easily be incorporated into media. In addition, this line of research suggests that using specific strategies to override bias can be effective;[159] those that are applicable to popular culture include perspective taking, individuation, and increasing opportunities for intergroup contact.[160] As we have discussed, the theoretical understanding of our engagement with popular culture suggests that these strategies can be translated from interpersonal interactions to the context of media consumption.

Catalytic and Synergistic Effects

Future research must also identify means to measure the catalytic and synergistic effects of popular culture. Current studies generally measure the effect of an intervention at a particular moment in time, and often the intervention consists of a single piece of media content. As Borum Chattoo explains in her research map, experimental research generally occurs in a laboratory context or the course of an online survey which does

not reflect the real world experience of popular culture. The promise of popular culture is in part the repeated nature of engagement as well as the experience within a group or community.[161] In addition, no one in the real world only sees a single piece of popular culture—we exist in a sea of the various forms of popular culture, which combine to constitute images and associations. These elements are critical to the potential impact of popular culture on social change, yet they have not yet been integrated into the research sufficiently.

Summary

This review aimed to address two complementary hypotheses regarding the potential for popular culture to shift public opinion. In doing so, we conducted a thorough review and synthesis of existing literature, noting where the research shows promising as well as where it falls short.

In regards to whether popular culture can be an effective instrument for positive social change, we identified characteristics of pop culture that make it a unique forum for shaping attitudes, such as the repeated representation of identity groups, the ability to trigger emotions and empathy, the use of a narrative format. Research suggests that we experience "interactions" in media similar to how we experience them interpersonally, and several theoretical insights point to the powerful implications of this phenomenon. While more targeted research is needed, we believe the evidence suggests pop culture has potential to effect social change.

We then examined the question of whether popular culture can improve public opinion and behavior toward immigrants and people of color. For every pop cultural medium that we researched, we were able to find studies utilizing interventions to bring about social change, and even very brief or minimal interventions produced significant results. Watching a single episode of a children's show,[162] or a movie,[163] or a short story,[164] or even a counter-stereotypical celebrity photograph[165] brought about measurable effects that could ultimately lead to social impacts. To be sure, the changes brought about by the interventions in the literature were not always behavioral—typically they were attitudinal or emotional[166]—and seldom did researchers analyze whether they would be long lasting.[167] Nor did the interventions always succeed as anticipated; an intervention might change subjects' symbolic beliefs about racism but fall short of increasing support affirmative action policies,[168] for example. Even so, the message from the literature is clear and encouraging: we found no evidence that any particular pop cultural medium is incapable of being employed for positive social change. As such, we believe that pop culture may be a promising avenue by which to tackle prejudices against outgroups—specifically, immigrants and people of color.

Recommendations

For pop culture to be a vehicle for positive social change, specifically by addressing stereotypes about and negative attitudes toward immigrants and people of color, careful evaluation is critical. As our discussion above illustrates, our knowledge about what works and why is still in early stages of development. Accordingly, rigorous evaluation is needed to identify and test specific strategies and content. We recommend a set of steps to maximize the utility and efficiency of such evaluations, by providing incentives for knowledge building and information sharing, and establishing baselines from which future impacts can be measured.

- In order to maximize the reach of the work being done in the field, including the findings of this report series, we recommend the **creation and maintenance of a central database of relevant information,** including reports monitoring the industry, case studies of relevant studies or projects, and discussions of evaluation methodologies. Pooling the knowledge in this way would contribute to greater rigor with less cost—for example, extant research results can be used as baselines for future projects. We can seed this database with the research studies and reports reviewed in this present volume of *#PopJustice*.

- In researching for this volume, we realized that pop culture is examined in wide variety of fields—future projects should capitalize on the expertise that exists across disciplines. In order to foster these connections and networks, we recommend the **creation and maintenance of a central database of academic researchers, organizations, companies, and other stakeholders** who are engaged in this work. *#PopJustice, Volume 2*: *Mapping the Players* provides a good starting point for this list.

- The research supports the critical importance of identity diversity in content creation if we ever hope to ensure the authentic representation of non-dominant identity groups in popular culture. An ongoing challenge is **obtaining accurate information about diversity within different companies and forms of reporting that allow comparisons and further accountability**. An annual report that includes identity characteristics—race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, LGBT identification, disability—of boards and decision-making executives, along with those in critical creative positions on mainstream Hollywood movies and TV series (including directors, writers, and actors), would be a valuable resource. To some extent, this kind of reporting and tracking exists already (see Appendix A), but it is quite fragmented.

- Identity diversity will only have the desired effects upon content creation if companies embrace the innovation. Companies that are locked into the culture created by those in dominant identity groups will produce content that reflects that culture regardless of the numeric changes. As a result, evaluations of institutional diversity must include climate assessments and other instruments to assess whether the identity diversity exists in contexts in which those from non-dominant groups will be in positions to influence the content. In *#PopJustice, Volume 4: Understanding the Entertainment Industry,* we detail the existing diversity programs within the large media companies and television networks, as well as those at the major creative guilds and unions. Impartial evaluation of the efficacy of these programs, individually and collectively, is a crucial contribution to our knowledge base. When we know what's actually working, we can codify best practices.

- We cannot overstate the importance of further research and evaluations. In order to understand how popular culture can best be harnessed to shift perceptions and stereotypes of marginalized groups, **we need to develop more sophisticated technologies and methodologies for identifying how change occurs**. We hope that this *#PopJustice* series will serve to inspire innovative original research, such as longitudinal studies, that will be a boon to the entire field.

- Future research efforts will be most effective if they involve **iterative collaborations between advocates, artists, industry, and evaluators** on specific projects, as well as convenings to bring the different players into direct conversation. The convenings would provide opportunities for identifying the different markers of success from each player's vantage point and the metrics best suited to measuring those markers.

- **Develop best practices for project level evaluation.** Advocates, content creators, and funders would benefit from the development of a shared and accessible language for understanding the varied methodological approaches for measuring change currently in use by evaluators and the establishment of a set of best practices for project level evaluations.

- **Develop a popular culture content baseline.** Because we are (rightly) relying upon industry and artists to develop content, advocates will need to have a clear understanding of the current portrayals of various identity groups, as well as measures to assess the effect on perceptions and attitudes of the different portrayals. We propose a study to code content within each relevant entertainment industry to identify the associations and images of various identity groups being propagated, to develop measures for understanding the effects of these portrayals, which combined will provide a baseline from which subsequent change can be measured.

- Once a baseline has been established, **regular coding and tracking of popular culture content** will be valuable to identify changes as they occur and to study the effects of altered portrayals. This content tracking should take advantage of innovations that allow for richer and more nuanced understandings of representation, including the interaction between characters, and the complexity of language used by characters of different races, ethnicities, and other forms of identity.

Develop evaluation processes for pools of investments. Individual projects can be evaluated using project specific evaluation methodologies, but funders are supporting a wide variety of projects and the combination of these projects may have cumulative or synergistic effects that will not be identified by the evaluation of individual projects. Accordingly, for funders to be able to assess the full impacts of their investments—such as the pool approach recommended in *#PopJustice, Volume 1: Social Justice and the Promise of Pop Culture Strategies*—evaluation plans and methodologies must be developed that broadly consider the portfolio of investments, the goals of each project, and the overarching goals of the portfolio.

Appendix A:
Monitoring Diversity in Hollywood

Numerous organizations have taken on monitoring diversity in Hollywood, through regular counts of people of color in popular culture content and production. A sample of monitoring reports is listed below. These reports are significant to this volume because diversity in the creation of popular culture is fundamental to ensuring adequate representation of people of color and immigrants in media.

Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California (USC)

> *Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014* (2015)
> by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Dr. Katherine Pieper
> http://annenberg.usc.edu/pages/~/media/MDSCI/Inequality%20in%20700%20Popular%20Films%2081415.ashx

> *Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films: Examining OnScreen Portrayals and Behind the Camera Diversity* (2014)
> by Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, Dr. Katherine Pieper
> http://annenberg.usc.edu/pages/~/media/MDSCI/Racial%20Inequality%20in%20Film%20 2007-2013%20Final.ashx

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)

> *Cultural Stereotyping, Media Bias, and Orientalism: Perceptions of Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East—A Bibliography*
> http://www.adc.org/fileadmin/ADC/Educational_Resources/Cultural_Stereotyping_ Media _Bias__and_Orientalism_-_Perceptions_of_Arabs__Muslims__and_the_Middle_East.pdf

Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University (SDSU)

> *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2014* (2015)
> by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen
> http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2014_Its_a_Mans_World_Report.pdf

Directors Guild of America (DGA)

> *Episodic Director Diversity Report* (published annually)
> http://www.dga.org/News/PressReleases/2015/150825-Episodic-Director-Diversity-Report.aspx

> *Five-Year Study of First-Time Directors in Episodic Television* (2015)
> http://www.dga.org/News/PressReleases/2015/150108-DGA-Five-Year-Study-of-First-Time-Directors-in-Episodic-Television.aspx

GLAAD

Studio Responsibility Index (published annually)
Tracking the quality and quantity of LGBT representations in mainstream Hollywood films.
2015 report: http://www.glaad.org/files/2015_SRI.pdf

Network Responsibility Index (published annually, through 2015)
An evaluation of the quantity and quality of images of LGBT people on television.
2015 report: http://www.glaad.org/files/GLAAD-2015-NRI.pdf

Where We Are On TV (2014)
Tracking trends and statistics for series regular characters on broadcast television with regard to sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity.
http://www.glaad.org/files/GLAAD-2014-WWAT.pdf

I AM PWD

Where We Are on TV: An I AM PWD Analysis of the 2011/2012 Season (2011)
http://www.iampwd.org/study-reveals-continued-lack-characters-disabilities-television

Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies

Shaheen, J.G. (2009). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, 3d. Ed.* (Olive Branch).
http://neareaststudies.as.nyu.edu/object/kc.media.jackshaheen.reelarabsvrealarabs

Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA)

Asian Pacific American Media Coalition's *Annual Television Report Card* (2012)
http://manaa.org/?p=207

Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)

Theatrical Market Statistics (published annually)
2014 report: http://www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2014.pdf

National Association of Latino Producers (NALIP)

The Latino Media Gap
By Frances Negron-Muntaner, with Chelsea Abbas, Luis Figueroa, and Samuel Robson
http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cser/downloads/Latino_Media_Gap_Report.pdf

National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)

Ending the Legacy of Racism in Sports and the Era of Harmful Indian Sports Mascots (2013)
http://www.ncai.org/resources/ncai_publications/ending-the-legacy-of-racism-in-sports-the-era-of-harmful-indian-sports-mascots

Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, UCLA

2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script (2015)
http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2-25-15.pdf

Screen Actors Guild (SAG)

Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Diversity in Entertainment (2013)
http://www.sagaftra.org/files/sag/documents/sagaftra_williams_lgbtstudy.pdf

Women's Media Center (WMC)

The Status of Women in the U. S. Media (2014)
http://wmc.3cdn.net/6dd3de8ca65852dbd4_fjm6yck9o.pdf

Writers Guild of America (WGA)

WGAW 2015 TV Staffing Brief (2015)
http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/who_we_are/tvstaffingbrief2015.pdf

Turning Missed Opportunities into Realized Ones (2014)
Part of a series of reports examining employment and earnings trends for writers in the Hollywood industry who have traditionally been underemployed in the industry: women, minority, and older writers.
http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/who_we_are/HWR14.pdf
Executive summary:
http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/who_we_are/hwr14execsum.pdf

Appendix B: About the Team

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Producers

Liz Manne Strategy (lizmanne.com) provides management consulting, cultural strategy, and other customized advisory services to nonprofits, pro-social businesses, and independent media makers.

Perception Institute (perception.org) is a consortium of researchers, advocates, and strategists that uses cutting-edge mind science research to reduce discrimination and other harms linked to race, gender, and other identity differences.

Project Funders

Unbound Philanthropy works in the field of migration to transform long-standing but solvable barriers to the human rights of migrants and refugees and their integration into host societies. They seek to strengthen social, civic, and economic opportunities and relationships of mutual responsibility and respect across communities. (unboundphilanthropy.org)

The Nathan Cummings Foundation is rooted in the Jewish tradition and committed to democratic values and social justice, including fairness, diversity, and community. They seek to build a socially and economically just society that values nature and protects the ecological balance for future generations, promotes humane health care, and fosters arts and culture that enriches communities. (nathancummings.org)

Fiscal Sponsor

Revolutions Per Minute (RPM) is a nonprofit agency that provides artists with strategy and support for their activism and philanthropy. (revolutionsperminute.net)

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