#representationmatters
Content as a Mirror to Culture
As creators and marketers, it’s our job to amplify the voice of the consumer, particularly those that are not well-represented or heard. Now, more than ever, we realize it’s time to listen more closely to the issues of underserved minorities and use these insights to develop a meaningful course of action. The high level of consumer interest in diverse stories and voices surfaced very strongly in this research. We believe our insights can inspire creators and marketers to get behind stories that offer a fresh point of view and bring to light more multi-faceted identities.

Cindi Smith, Vice President, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Practice, National Research Group

Industry Luminaries

Dr. Valerie Adams-Bass
Assistant Professor
University of Virginia

Whitney Headen
CEO
19th & Park

Dr. Dana Mastro
Professor
University of California, Santa Barbara

Dr. Julius Riles
Assistant Professor
University of Missouri

Gil L. Robertson
Co-Founder & President
African American Film Critics Association

Tirrell D. Whittley
Founder & CEO
Liquid Soul

Schuyler Bailar
Transgender Advocate and Motivational Speaker

Louiza “Weeze” Doran
Anti-Racism Educator & Social Innovator
91% of Americans believe content/media has the power to influence society. No one believes this more strongly than Black Gen Z (97%).

2 in 3 Black Americans say they don’t see themselves or their culture represented on screen.

Black Americans believe the way Black Americans are portrayed in media influences perceptions about them in the real world. Total believe Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes of Black people.

Representation is not a certainty for all groups and it’s not consistent across different platforms. There’s a lot of nuance that must be considered. We also have to be thoughtful that Black Americans are not a monolithic group.

Media has the Power to Incite Positive Change

Being a Black person automatically means you’re subjected to white supremacy and racism. Being a woman means you’re subjected to misogyny and sexism. Being a trans person means you’re subjected to transphobia and misogyny. You put those all together as a Black trans woman walking through the world and you have to walk through all of the worst parts of all of those things.

Schuyler Bailar
Transgender Advocate and Motivational Speaker

Dr. Dana Mastro
Professor, University of California, Santa Barbara
Sizable gaps in understanding

Most Americans *underestimate* the improvement in representation needed, compared to what Black Americans believe.

Representation of Black Americans in Hollywood *has improved a lot* since the 1960s

The way Black Americans are portrayed in entertainment media *influences perceptions* about them in the real world

Blinders to remove

**Don’t see the problem**

“*I don’t recall seeing any of the stereotypes*”

“The stereotypes are very harmful”

**Industry reproduces problems**

“*Black writers and directors are not represented in Hollywood*”

“*Hollywood has a problem with excluding diverse characters and not hiring Black actors*”

“*Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes about Black people*”

We don’t need white men writing for us. We need diverse people of all backgrounds and ethnicities to tell these stories.”

- Female, Black, 53

Voices aren’t being heard

“It’s obvious when characters of color/Black stories aren’t written by people of color”

“It really bothers me when Black characters aren’t written by Black people. It’s always painfully obvious and it makes the character seem fake and inauthentic.”

-Male, Black, 50

As creators, marketers and brands, how can we leverage our influence as a force for positive change?
Recognizing the Importance of Diverse Stories

"The fact of the matter is that films and TV shows that promote diversity and inclusivity perform well. It’s time that the studio system and the stakeholders in the industry recognize that diversity sells."

Gil Robertson
Co-Founder & President
African American Film Critics Association

Cultural diversity is a key driver for content engagement, particularly among Black Americans and Gen Z audiences

Important characteristics when choosing what to watch:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen Z</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Black Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makes me think</td>
<td>+ Diverse cast</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tells an important story</td>
<td>+ Representative of different cultures or people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>+ Features complex characters of color</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opens my mind</td>
<td>+ Teaches me something new</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative or unconventional</td>
<td>+ Representative of people like me</td>
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86% of Black Americans want to see stories that are more representative of people like me vs. 7 in 10 Total

I think there was a time where there were rumors that box office sales, television sales, and revenue were not attached to a Black audience. But in the last five or ten years, especially as media consumption habits have increased, we’re seeing that that’s not true. We’re seeing that, not only do these films and TV shows do well with full audiences—they also over-index on revenue and audience sentiment.

Whitney Headen
CEO, 19th & Park

3 in 4 Americans say content that is representative of different cultures or people is a key factor when choosing what to watch
Demand is here—we’re just waiting for the stories

Q: What content would you like to see more of in the future?

Content with characters that break racial stereotypes
92% 82%
Black Americans Total

Content that features mixed-race characters or families
92% 86%

Content that has Black characters from all types of economic backgrounds
91% 85%

Content with Black directors or writers
91% 85%

Content with diverse casts
90% 85%

Content with unknown Black figures in history
90% 80%

Content with all Black casts
90% 77%

Content that depicts Black people in "everyday life"
88% 83%

Content with characters that break gender stereotypes
85% 74%

What type of relationships do they want to see?

Friendships and mixed families come first, with romantic relationships proving more complex. It’s not that Black Americans don’t want to see it; it’s that they also want to see representations of strong, positive, healthy Black romantic relationships—which they don’t see often enough in media.

Black/other ethnicities (Latinx, Asian, etc.) +9 points ahead of interest in seeing Black/white

“I’d like to see more Black writers and directors hired to make films of different genres, including fantasy and science-fiction.”
-Male, Black, 47

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-Male, Black, 47

“In movies, we are always forced to deal with race, which is not the only issue Black people face. I have yet to see a Black-led movie that has adventure, magic, or tells a coming-of-age story.”
-Female, Black, 21

TV shows and movies focus too much on Black pain, and make every single issue or plot about race. While I agree that we should never lose touch with who we are, constantly pointing out the differences between the races only widens the chasm between us.”
-Male, Black, 51

I’m a big proponent of telling our stories. I understand people’s appetite to see something fresh and new. There are a lot of narratives in our history books that have not been told.

Tirrell D. Whittley
Founder & CEO, Liquid Soul
Across the ecosystem

Americans believe addressing societal issues such as racial equality (77%) and social justice (75%) are the most important areas for improvement, but Media isn’t far behind.

Progress in Media/Advertising and Content/Entertainment industries has been slow:

1 in 3

Americans say the industries have improved over the past 10 years

6 in 10

Americans believe the Media/Advertising industry (Advertising, Beauty/Fashion, Social Media & Tech) needs to improve its representation of Black Americans. vs. 77% of Black Americans

7 in 10

Americans think the Content/Entertainment industry (Film, TV, Music & Gaming) needs to improve its representation of Black Americans. vs. 77% of Black Americans

“Outreach in underserved communities would be an excellent strategy to have more diverse qualified people working with you in the future.”

-Female, Black, 24

Has representation improved? It’s complicated. In my opinion, the good has gotten better and the bad has not. We see more portrayals of Black people in various situations, sometimes even in positions of authority... that’s good. The associations of Black people with threats and gang activity...we still see that too often times in the news or in entertainment media.

Dr. Julius Riles
Assistant Professor,
University of Missouri

“The tech industry and social media can’t be carried by white people alone. Include people of color in the conversations, at the table, in the creative process. Include people of color in any and everything you can, because diversity is strength. When you have diverse voices you get diverse outcomes.”

-Female, Black, 21
Deep dive into entertainment

Off-screen
Not enough Black executives or creatives in positions of power

The top most effective actions for the industry are:
+ Better distribution opportunities for Black content creators
  91% Black Americans, 82% total
+ Specific hiring efforts for Black creatives/writers and directors
  90% Black Americans, 78% total

On-screen
Black characters often represent negative stereotypes and are not made relatable enough

When it comes to the representation and inclusion of Black people in Hollywood and the media industry, Black characters representing negative stereotypes of Black people is the top pain point among 91% of Black Americans. The most familiar and harmful stereotypes represent broken homes, violence, addiction, rage and sexual promiscuity.

Race is often used across media as a lazy storytelling device so you don’t have to give context or explain backstory, and that continues to happen.

Dr. Dana Mastro
Professor, University of California, Santa Barbara

Representation in TV and Movies

TV has led the way in integrating diverse stories and characters into programming. In recent years, Film has increased representation across a few experiential genres but still needs to do more to promote diversity.
Out of all the movies I've seen I believe **Black Panther** has done positive representation the best. It challenged all of the usual stereotypes by showcasing Black people in empowering positions and although the cast was all Black, it didn't feel intentionally Black. *It made Black people feel proud, celebrated, and empowered watching it.*

-Female, Black, 21

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**Best examples** of representation and inclusion in entertainment in recent years, and according to Black Americans

- **Black Panther** 52%
- **Black-ish** 36%
- **Empire** 19%
- **Black Lightning** 17%
- **Grown-ish** 16%
- **Get Out** 15%

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**What they get right**

Approximately *1 in 2 Black Americans* cite character development as key to success:

+ Black characters are the focus of the story
+ Black characters are realistic
+ Black characters in roles we don't normally see Black actors in
Next-generation creators are taking control of their own cultural narratives, opening up a world of creativity

Gen Z recognizes the change we want to see:

90% of Gen Z thinks **better distribution opportunities** for Black content creators will be effective for improving representation and inclusion in the entertainment industry.

84% of Gen Z agrees there isn’t enough funding for entertainment content created by Black people.

**Key characteristics for Gen Z when choosing what to watch:**

- **Representative of different cultures or people:** 79%
- **Features complex characters of color:** 76%
- **Challenges racial stereotypes:** 72%
- **Takes a stand on social issues:** 70%
- **Challenges gender stereotypes:** 66%

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**EXPERT SPOTLIGHT**

**With creators turning to digital platforms and alternative forms of distribution...**

As Black youth became more skilled using technology, they became more critical of the media they were consuming, and they began to create and tell stories from their perspectives.

- **Dr. Valerie Adams-Bass**
  Assistant Professor, University of Virginia

**These kids can create phenomenal content with an iPhone and a ring light...the threshold to create content has greatly reduced for them.**

- **Tirrell D. Whittley**
  Founder & CEO, Liquid Soul

We’re in a very unique time. People have time sitting at home. And we’re living in a digital age where you can film movies on an iPhone. Gen Z is killing the game. Some of the content these kids are putting out there is blowing my mind.

- **Louiza “Weeze” Doran**
  Anti-Racism Educator & Social Innovator
Black Americans’ message to the media industry

“Consult with a vast group of Black Americans for proper representation. Research, be conscious, cautious, and considerate when writing for Black characters to reduce further harm to a vulnerable and oppressed group.”

-Female, Black, 31

“There have been some phenomenal shifts in who is controlling the narratives. Not across the board, but in some really impactful ways. I am seeing more space being made for creatives of color, voices of color, and leadership of color in content creation spaces. And honestly, it does give me hope.

-Louiza “Weeze” Doran
Anti-Racism Educator & Social Innovator

“Please stop using us for diversity or for background characters. We are our own people with our own stories, not just back-up for the white people.”

-Female, Black, 20

“Include all types of Black people, not just the Black people with lighter skin or people who fit European standards of beauty. I want to see more inclusiveness with Black people.”

-Female, Black, 24

“Portray your characters as people, and don’t be afraid to go against stereotypes. We’re just as layered, unique and culturally diverse as whites. And just because something stars Black people doesn’t mean it has to be about Black issues all the time. Get more diverse people behind the camera to reflect more diversity in front of it.”

-Male, Black, 51
**Strategic Implications**

**Reducing stereotypes**

**DON’T**

Reduce Black characters to stereotypes

The most familiar and harmful stereotypes represent broken homes, violence, addiction, rage and sexual promiscuity.

Stereotypical characters tend to be removed from the main action of the series, and oftentimes content creators will attempt to be more inclusive through tokenism: featuring a token minority figure in content that otherwise features no other characters that share their identity.

Minorities often feel that when members of their group are featured in the media, their stories are focused on tropes related to their identity. These portrayals and storylines have come under increased scrutiny in recent years for subtly emphasizing the ways that minorities differ from the status quo.

**4 in 5**
Black Americans think it's obvious when a character of color wasn't written by someone of that race.

**DO**

Develop complex, realistic, multi-dimensional Black characters

A positive portrayal is often created by having someone who shares the identity involved in production, designing characters seen in respected and powerful positions, and offering a fresh point of view that stems from a multi-faceted identity. Creators should not convey Black Americans as a monolithic group; a multi-faceted identity is signaled by everything from socioeconomic markers to elements of racial identity such as skin tones and hair textures.
More diverse storytelling

DON’T

Let the dominant narrative be about Black struggle

There’s an abundance of both contemporary and historical stories about the struggles of the lived Black experience, and while these stories are important, they shouldn’t be the only options for engaging with Black stories. It’s critical that the dominant content narrative is not limited to Black struggle and pain.

DO

Tell untold stories

There’s a desire for greater diversity in the types of story being told.

Audiences are hungry to see something fresh and new, with appetite to see stories in our history books that have not been told.

When it comes to the contemporary Black experience, audiences crave more subtle, realistic portrayals of the lived experience across many walks of life. **83% of Americans (87% Black Americans) are likely to watch content that depicts Black people in everyday life**, and **85% of all Americans (92% Black Americans) would watch Black characters from all types of economic backgrounds.**

8 in 10

Americans, led by 88% of Black Americans, would watch content about unknown Black figures in history.
One of the key problems cited when it comes to representation and inclusion of Black people in Hollywood and media is that content about Black people is always about being Black (72% Total, 79% Black Americans). 77% of Americans (70% Black Americans) agree that regardless of genre, they want to see content starring Black people where the story doesn’t center around being Black.

Black Panther and Black Lightning signaled the potential for out-of-the-box genres, such as Superhero, Sci/Fi and Fantasy, to bring Black stories to the masses. Our research reveals mainstream appeal for Black content in a futuristic setting (77% Total, 85% Black Americans) or in a fantasy setting (74% Total, 86% Black Americans). These immersive genres can inspire and empower audiences to see Black characters in a new context.

**Changing mainstream mindsets**

**DON’T**

Limit the inclusion of dynamic Black characters to Black stories

**DO**

Expand the audience for Black stories through out-of-the-box genres

Are you ready to up your representation game?

Our Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Practice champions shifting the narrative around what diverse audiences seek from products and services. Bringing deep expertise in cultural insights, we help clients connect with audiences across all screens, with an emphasis on the multicultural consumer. To learn more about this study or how we can help your business understand and connect with audiences, get in touch: cindi.smith@nrgmr.com

METHODOLOGY: From September 5-8, 2020, NRG conducted a nationally representative survey of n=1,388 18-54 year-old Americans who engage with TV, movies, social media, or video games frequently. NRG's consumer interviews were conducted in partnership with leading providers of market research panels, including Dynata, Prodege, Marketcube, and DISQO. NRG additionally conducted eight in-depth expert interviews with media/cultural theorists, NGOs and NPOs, and industry leaders to inform the research.

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