#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

- 87% of Black Americans believe the way Black Americans are portrayed in media influences perceptions about them in the real world.
- 77% of the total population share the same concern.
- 83% of Black Americans believe Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes of Black people.
- 66% of the total population share the same concern.

Black Americans are not a monolithic group

2 in 3 Americans across political ideologies and ethnicities think there’s a need for greater representation of all groups listed:

- Black gay men
- Black children
- Black women
- Black men with disabilities
- Any mixed race
- Black women with disabilities
- Black transgender women
- Black non-binary or genderqueer
- Black teenagers
- Black men

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

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.

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

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

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”

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

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

A KEY INFLECTION POINT:

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>+ Representative of different cultures or people</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>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

86% of Black Americans want to see stories that are more representative of people like me vs. 7 in 10 Total
Demand is here—we’re just waiting for the stories

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Type</th>
<th>Black Americans</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characters that break racial stereotypes</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-race characters or families</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black characters from all types of economic backgrounds</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black directors or writers</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse casts</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown Black figures in history</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Black casts</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depicts Black people in “everyday life”</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters that break gender stereotypes</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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'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

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

-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
The Entire Media Ecosystem Needs to Step Up Its Representation Game

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.

Real-life situations and fictional narratives that are relatable to viewers provide important perspectives and dimensions that can help bridge gaps between cultures and communities.
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%

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

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
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.

Gen Z wants to see more content in the future that:

- Is representative of different cultures or people
  - 66% of Gen Z
  - Total 58%
- Has a diverse cast
  - 61% of Gen Z
  - Total 55%
- Features complex characters of color
  - 61% of Gen Z
  - Total 54%
- Challenges racial stereotypes
  - Total 58%
  - 51%
- Challenges gender stereotypes
  - Total 55%
  - 44%
- Takes a stand on social issues
  - Total 52%
  - 48%
- Takes a stand on political issues
  - Total 43%
  - 39%

Key characteristics for Gen Z when choosing what to watch:

- Representative of different cultures or people
  - 79% of Gen Z
  - Total 74%
- Features complex characters of color
  - 76% of Gen Z
  - Total 71%
- Challenges racial stereotypes
  - 72% of Gen Z
  - Total 66%
- Challenges gender stereotypes
  - Total 66%
  - 58%
- Takes a stand on social issues
  - Total 70%
  - 64%
- Takes a stand on political issues
  - Total 66%
  - 53%
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

“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

“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

“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

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
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.

Issa Rae in Insecure

HBO/WARNER MEDIA
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.

**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

**METHODODOLOGY:** 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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