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Adolescent Perceptions of Black-Oriented Media: "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black"

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Abstract

Black-oriented media, content with predominately Black casts and/or racial themes, is marketed primarily toward Black audiences. However, how audiences perceive such targeting is unclear. To investigate this, Black and White adolescents ($n=1,990$) identified the perceived target audiences of 15 movies (12 Black-oriented). Results from Item Response Theory and multiple regression suggest that Black adolescents, especially those with strong ethnic identity, differentiate Black-oriented from mainstream movies. Black adolescents report higher exposure to Black-oriented films, particularly if they perceive such films as targeted to Black audiences. White adolescents find it more difficult to identify Black-oriented films. This suggests that Black-oriented films might be successfully marketed beyond Black audiences.

- Black adolescent audiences perceive Black-oriented media to be targeted toward them, especially those who have strong ethnic identity.
- White adolescent audiences generally perceive Black-oriented media to be targeted toward anyone.
- Black-oriented content may find greater mainstream marketing success if advertisers target both Black and White audiences.

Keywords

film; identity; marketing; targeting; race; adolescents

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When Beyoncé released her hit single and related video “Formation” and performed the song at the 2016 Super Bowl, some controversy arose because of the way the song, video, and performance highlighted Beyoncé’s Black heritage (Osterheldt, 2016, February 8; Robinson, 2016, February 8). Some reactions seemed to imply that the audience had forgotten that Beyoncé is, in fact, Black. Shortly after the Super Bowl, *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit called “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black” (Anderson, 2016, February 14; Reporter, 2016, February 15). The most relevant segment of the skit is when a White character says, “Maybe this song isn’t for us?” and another replies in a panic, “*But usually everything is!*” The song and video – and the reactions to them – highlighted an aspect of popular culture that is not often scrutinized: the idea that there is content made for mainstream audiences and content targeted toward smaller audience segments. However, audiences may not agree about the target of certain media content and this may impact that content’s popularity and financial success.

One demographic whose perceptions may be both highly important and fairly fluid in nature is that of adolescents. Adolescents spend approximately three hours per day watching film and television (Rideout, 2015). They watch an average of 31 films per year (Nielsen, 2009), 6 of those in the theater (MPAA, 2016), and they comprise 15% of “frequent moviegoers” while representing 8% of the population (MPAA, 2016). Adolescents represent a large market for film and television and whether they perceive content to be targeted towards them, and their likelihood of selecting that content, is important for media producers and marketers to know. In particular, racial diversity may be an important factor in adolescent perceptions about film and television content.

Black adolescents spend more time using media than White and Hispanic adolescents (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016; Jordan et al., 2010; Rideout, 2015). One explanation for this difference is that Black adolescents select both mainstream content and content that includes more Black characters (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016). The latter is often referred to as “Black-oriented” and tends to be defined in the academic literature and the popular press as content with predominately Black casts and/or that directly addresses racial themes (Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Dal Cin, Stoolmiller, & Sargent, 2013; Jones, 1990; Schooler, 2008; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004; Sheridan, 2006). As the name suggests, Black-oriented content tends to be marketed primarily to Black audiences (Darden & Bayton, 1977; Licata & Biswas, 1993).

The Current Study and Hypotheses

It is unknown if academic definitions of “Black-oriented” correspond with audience perceptions. Do adolescents differentiate between Black-oriented and mainstream media content? Are these perceptions associated with exposure to that content? These issues have implications for perceived representation and diversity in media which is an important and timely topic in popular culture (Griggs, 2016, January 14). They also have implications for the way movies are marketed. If “Black-oriented” is not a classification that adolescents – the largest share of moviegoers – recognize, the more broadly such content could be marketed. Ethnic diversity in Hollywood is currently on an erratic but upward trajectory (Hunt, Ramon, & Price, 2014; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015), and knowledge about

how and to whom content with diverse casts should be marketed will be important for continuing that trend.

A character's race can impact the way audience members identify with and evaluate that character, with Blacks reporting higher identification with and liking for Black characters than for White characters (Appiah, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). Whites, on the other hand, seem to respond to Black and White characters relatively equally (Appiah, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). This is also the case with targeted website content, such that Blacks spend more time with and have better recall for Black targeted websites as opposed to White targeted ones, while White respondents demonstrate no difference by targeting (Appiah, 2003). Blacks perceive Black spokespeople to be more trustworthy (Deshpandé & Stayman, 1994) and marketing effects are stronger with targeted advertisements to Blacks (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000). There is also evidence that Black adolescents report stronger media effects for Black-oriented media than for mainstream media while White adolescents report no difference in effect (Dal Cin et al., 2013; Schooler et al., 2004). Based on these few studies, there is a pattern where Black adolescents are likely to seek out, enjoy, and experience stronger influence from media content with Black characters. White adolescents, however, seem to respond to mainstream and Black-oriented media and to White and Black characters in largely the same way.

A possible explanation for this difference in responses to race in media is distinctiveness theory (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). Distinctiveness theory is the idea that identity is multifaceted (e.g., one can identify as female, Asian, a parent, a writer, etc.). Which parts of one's identity that are salient and thus impact perception at any given time will be a function of which aspects are contextually relevant. One context for one identity to be more salient than others is that it is distinct from other groups (McGuire et al., 1978). Specifically, those in the minority will report higher salience of their minority identity group status than those in the majority (Cota & Dion, 1986; McGuire et al., 1978). The relevant identity group for the present study is Black Americans. Their numerical minority status in the U.S. means that Blacks' racial group can become consistently accessible and important. Whites, however, should not feel that their identity as White is important until something makes them aware of it, such as if they walked into a room full of non-White people (Phinney, 1992).

Based on research on distinctiveness theory and Black and White adolescents' responses to media characters, we predict that Black adolescents will be more likely to identify Black-oriented media as being targeted toward Black audiences, and White adolescents will report less distinction on perceived target audience between Black-oriented and mainstream content.

H1: Black adolescents will more easily distinguish between Black-oriented media content and mainstream media content than White adolescents.

Adolescence is a critical life stage for identity processes because it is a time of identity formation (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Phinney, 1989, 1990). Adolescents will often go through a period of identity questioning, evaluation, and definition. This may involve trying out various identities and negotiating the

importance and meaning of group memberships (French et al., 2006; Moshman, 2005). Research with Black adolescents suggests that at any given point roughly half of them are not currently and have not yet begun to question or search for ethnic identity, one quarter are actively assessing their ethnic identity, and the remaining quarter have achieved a stable ethnic identity after a period of questioning, with the likelihood of ethnic identity achievement increasing with age (Phinney, 1990; Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006). Therefore, although distinctiveness theory predicts that being a member of a salient minority group will influence group distinctiveness and thus perceptions of marketing should be based on that group membership, Black adolescents with weak or undefined ethnic identities may not show this effect to the same extent. Black adult respondents with stronger ethnic identity had more positive evaluations of advertisements that featured Black actors in dominant positions (Green, 1999). Similarly, another study found that Asian American adolescents lacking strong ethnic identities were less likely to select Asian-language films, music, and cultural performances (Xu, Shim, Lotz, & Almeida, 2004). We expect a similar pattern for Black adolescents. There is not, however, a stance from distinctiveness theory suggesting that ethnic identity should matter for White adolescents. As the majority ethnic group their identities should not be salient nor factor into their perceptions.

H2: Ethnic identity will moderate the extent to which Black adolescents distinguish between the perceived target audiences for Black-oriented and mainstream media content, such that stronger identity will be associated with greater distinction between the types of content.

In addition to perceptions of the intended target of media content, adolescents' exposure to that content is also important. Black adolescents' exposure to Black characters has been associated with a variety of outcomes, including liking and enjoyment (Abrams & Giles, 2007; Appiah, 2002), identity building (Arnett, 1995; Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016), and stronger media effects (Dal Cin et al., 2013; Schooler et al., 2004). As mentioned, Black adolescents watch more television and movies than White adolescents (Jordan et al., 2010), possibly in part to include more content with Black characters (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016). There is also evidence that Black people will seek out content that they expect will portray Black characters positively and avoid content that they believe will portray Black characters negatively (Abrams & Giles, 2007), something that may be influenced by perceived targeting. Therefore, we expect that Black adolescents will be more likely to expose themselves to Black-oriented media content, and that this will be moderated by the extent to which they see such content as targeted toward them.

H3: Black adolescents will report higher exposure to Black-oriented media content than White adolescents.

H4: Black respondents' exposure to Black-oriented media will be moderated by their perceptions of whether the media is targeted to Black audiences, such that greater perceived targeting will be associated with more exposure.

H5: Ethnic identity will moderate the extent to which Black adolescents report exposure to Black-oriented and mainstream media content, such that stronger identity will be associated with greater exposure to Black-oriented content.

Method and Measures

Survey Participants

Participants were 2,432 adolescents aged 14–17 years who were recruited through survey company GfK between November 13 and December 14, 2015. Some were recruited directly ($n=588$) and the rest were recruited through their parents ($n=1,844$). Parents of teens were asked for consent, and all participants were given assent information. Eight participants who indicated a sex of “other” were removed from analysis. Black participants were oversampled for a roughly equal sample of Black and White respondents. For the purposes of racial group comparison, only non-Hispanic Black ($n = 1,000$) and non-Hispanic White ($n = 990$) participants were included in the present analysis (total $n=1,990$, 50.25% Black). Of those, 972 (48.84%) were female and the ages were: 14 years (21.26%), 15 years (25.73%), 16 years (25.98%), and 17 years (27.04%).

The Movie Sample

This survey was a part of a study that assessed the influence of 34 Black-oriented films and 29 mainstream films on adolescent health behaviors. The original sample of films was selected as follows: the top 30-grossing films of 2014 according to *Variety* magazine were selected as mainstream films. Black-oriented films were defined based on prior research as those with 50% or greater of the main characters being Black and/or a narrative theme of race, racism, or Black culture (Schooler, 2008; Schooler et al., 2004). Of the top 1,000 films across 2013 and 2014 (www.boxofficemojo.com), 30 films with predominately Black casts were selected. Three films that did not have predominantly Black casts but that covered racial themes (Allen et al., 1989; Sheridan, 2006) were added to the list (*42* (38% Black cast), *12 Years a Slave* (29% Black cast), and *Fruitvale Station* (33% Black cast)). Finally, one film that was originally coded with the mainstream films (*Ride Along*) met the criterion for a predominately Black cast. Thus the final sample for the full study included 29 mainstream films and 34 Black-oriented films.

Fifteen films from the initial sample were selected to be assessed for participants' target audience perceptions. A random number generator was used to select 12 of the 34 Black-oriented films (*Think Like a Man Too*, *About Last Night*, *Selma*, *The Butler*, *The Best Man Holiday*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Baggage Claim*, *Fruitvale Station*, *Tyler Perry Presents Peeples*, *Black Nativity*, *Winnie Mandela*, *42*). The top three mainstream films of 2014 (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1*, *Captain America: Winter Soldier*) were the mainstream comparisons.

Measures

Perceptions of the target audiences—Participants were asked, “For the 15 movies below, please indicate who you think is the target audience. Is it mostly Black/African American moviegoers or all moviegoers? You can also indicate if you are not familiar with a movie title.” Participants selected between “Mostly Black moviegoers”, “All moviegoers”, and “I have never heard of this movie.” The “I have never heard of this movie” responses were treated as missing values because in these cases, only the title contains any information about the movie which could bias when racial references are or not included. For regression

analysis perceived target audience was operationalized as a count from zero to 12 of the number of the Black-oriented movies participants rated as targeted toward mostly Black audiences ($M=3.56$, $SD=3.28$).

Exposure to the films—Participants indicated whether they had seen each film never (0), once (1), or more than once (2); all films $M=0.42$, $SD=0.38$; mainstream $M=0.80$, $SD=0.58$; Black-oriented $M=0.32$, $SD=0.40$).

Ethnic identity—Strength of ethnic identity was assessed with “inclusion of the in-group in the self” (Tropp & Wright, 2001). This item involves seven pairs of overlapping circles, with one representing the individual and one representing one’s racial group. The pairs of circles begin completely separate from one another at point one, and gradually overlap more and more until they are nearly completely overlapped at point seven ($M=4.57$, $SD=2.25$). For our classification, values from 5–7 were considered “High” identity, and responses of four (the midpoint) and below were considered “Low” identity. Of the Black respondents, 52% were classified as high identity.

Sensation-seeking—Sensation seeking was included as a known covariate of media use, in order to reduce the likelihood that individual propensity to watch media (and certain types of media) was influencing results. It was measured using the four-item brief scale (e.g., “I like friends who are exciting and unpredictable”, 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), $M=3.29$, $SD=1.00$, Cronbach $\alpha = .87$) (Stephenson, Hoyle, Palmgreen, & Slater, 2003).

Statistical Analysis

Item response theory (IRT) analysis was used to test the hypotheses regarding the extent to which adolescents distinguish between mainstream and Black-oriented content (H1, H2). Multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses regarding the prediction of exposure to the content (H3, H4, H5). Regression coefficients reported are unstandardized.

IRT assumes a latent underlying factor or “trait” (“theta” in the IRT vocabulary) that underlies the choice between a decision to classify a movie as targeted to “Mostly Black” or “All Moviegoers”. In other words, in this data, we treat each outcome as a “true/false” perception rather than a “true/false” question as in the case of educational tests and other classification tasks (Edelen & Reeve, 2007; Reeve, Hays, Chang, & Perfetto, 2007). We can then use IRT to model these choices in terms of the two IRT parameters: “discrimination” and “difficulty”. *Discrimination* is the slope of the line of each movie as it distinguishes between “Not Mostly Black” (starting at the zero point on the Y-axis) and “Mostly Black” (ending at the unity point on the Y-axis). IRT assumes a nonlinear relationship (the logistic) which accounts for the “S” shaped function relating the X (theta) axis trait to the Y-axis probabilistic choice outcome. If the line is steep, then small changes in the latent trait X have large consequences in term of the probability of the “Mostly Black” choice. If the line is flatter, then it takes a large change in X to affect the probability of the “Mostly Black” choice. *Difficulty* is the location on the theta axis where the discrimination slope predicts a probability of 50% (or more) on the outcome choice (De Ayala, 2013). “Easy” items are located on the left (e.g. the low side) of the theta axis and “difficult” items on the right (e.g.,

on the high side) of the theta axis because in the first case low values of the latent trait motivate the choice and in the second case high values of the latent trait motivate the choice. A vertical line to the theta axis for each of the items at the “50%” probability cut-off shows the location on the theta axis and therefore shows the difficulty ordering of each item. If Hypothesis 1 is supported, we should see the Black-oriented movies having steeper slopes that begin further to the left of the graph for Black adolescents than for White adolescents – indicating low difficulty and high discrimination for classifying the Black-oriented movies as targeted to Black audiences. The remaining hypotheses and research questions were evaluated with OLS regression. All IRT and regression analyses were conducted with STATA 14 (StataCorp, 2015).

Three of the movies (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1*, and *Captain America: Winter Soldier*) were selected because they were the top three grossing movies, hence they were assumed to be mainstream (i.e., for all moviegoers). From an IRT standpoint, these should have low discrimination (flatter slopes) and high difficulty (50% probability point on the right hand end of the X (theta) axis). In contrast, one of the Black-oriented movies (*Black Nativity*) has the word “Black” in the title. This movie should be easy to identify as Black targeted. Thus, we would expect *Black Nativity* to be the furthest movie to the left of the graph, with the steepest slope (easiest to categorize as a Black-oriented movie). We term these four movies the “calibration set” because they should bracket the other 11 movies in terms of difficulty ordering.

Results

Figure 1 shows the three groups (White, low identity Black, high identity Black) in terms of the proportion of respondents exposed to the movie (the X axis) and the classification of the movie as Black-oriented (Y axis). The mainstream movies have high exposure (50% or more) and are virtually never classified as Black-oriented (< 5%) for any group. Black respondents classify the remaining movies as Black-oriented movies, ranging from a low of 30% for *About Last Night* for the low identity group and a high of 75% for *Black Nativity* in the high identity group. Exposure to the Black-oriented movies for Black respondents ranged from a low of 15% for *Mandela* (low-identity) to a high of 59% for *Think Like a Man Too* (high-identity).

Like Black respondents, White respondents agree on both dimensions of exposure to and classification of the mainstream movies. However, White respondents show lower exposures to all Black-oriented movies: the highest viewing rate is for *12 Years a Slave* (23%) and the lowest is for *Baggage Claim* (8%). They also are far less likely to classify the movies as targeted to Black audiences.

IRT results

IRT was used for three groups of respondents: high identity Blacks, low identity Blacks, and Whites. Whites were not segmented by identity because as distinctiveness theory indicates, the identities of the majority group members should not be as strong of a factor as it is for minority groups (McGuire et al., 1978). As previously mentioned, the “I have never heard of this movie” responses were treated as missing values on a pairwise basis for each film’s IRT

curve. The movie with the lowest number of usable responses (*Fruitvale Station*) was evaluated by 950 participants (342 White, 325 high identity Black, and 283 low identity Black) while the highest (*The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part I*) was evaluated by 1,854 participants (926 White, 491 High Identity Black, and 437 Low Identity Black). Note that the analysis was also run separating those participants who reported having seen each film and those who have not. The results were highly similar and the interpretation was the same but the reduced sample size, however, complicated the statistical testing of slope differences (i.e., 66 White respondents saw *Fruitvale Station*, and 14 classified it as a “Black-oriented” movie) and no convergence of the IRT model was encountered in some cases. Therefore, we only remove those who report never having heard of the film, and include those who have not seen the film but who report at least some familiarity with it.

The IRT plots are shown in Figure 2. For ease of comparison, each plot has a vertical line at theta value 0 (i.e., the mean value of the standardized X axis). For all groups, the difficulty (location) of classifying the movies as targeted to Blacks is far to the left (lower difficulty) while the mainstream movies are far to the right (higher difficulty). Low identity Black adolescents have a harder time categorizing the Black-oriented movies (the discrimination lines are less clustered on the left) and this is especially true for White respondents: All but two of the movies have difficulty values greater than zero for White respondents.

We can test for differences between high identity Blacks, low identity Blacks, and Whites in two ways. The first is using general omnibus tests for different discrimination slopes. Likelihood ratio tests can statistically differentiate between IRT models that assume common slopes for all movies for each group (i.e., the null hypothesis) compared with different discrimination parameters for the movies across groups (DeMars, 2010, p. 57). This test suggests that high and low identity Black respondents have different slopes for their movie classifications, $\chi^2(15)=45.02, p<.01$. The same is true between White and high identity Black respondents, $\chi^2(14)=62.01, p<.05$. This omnibus test also rejects the null hypothesis for White vs. low identity Black respondents, $\chi^2(14)=32.54, p<.05$. Thus, all three groups are significantly different from one another, such that high identity Blacks show significantly greater discrimination when classifying the Black-oriented movies than low identity Blacks, which show significantly greater discrimination than Whites. Based on these omnibus tests, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are both supported.

Our second approach is comparing the difficulty parameters – how difficult is it for each group to categorize each Black movie? Here we use nonlinear difference tests to compare the difficulty for *Black Nativity* (the easiest film to classify as Black-oriented for all groups) and *About Last Night* (the most difficult to classify as Black-oriented for all groups) to see whether there are differences in the difficulty spread by group. The difficulty values for *Black Nativity* are not statistically different, meaning all three groups find it equally easy to identify *Black Nativity* as targeted to Blacks. But a better test is the difficulty for *About Last Night* as the Black movie that is the most difficult to classify, as given the equal difficulties for *Black Nativity* knowing the spread from there to *About Last Night* tells us how difficult all the movies were to classify. The curve for Whites for *About Last Night* (i.e., the curve with the dotted pattern just to the left of the three Mainstream movies in Figure 2) has a difficulty of 1.48, while for high identity Blacks it has a difficulty of 0.77 and for low

identity Blacks one of 0.55. The difficulty values are not significantly different between the Black identity groups, $t=1.46$, 95% CI(-0.08, 0.52). But the differences in difficulty are significant for Whites vs. high identity Blacks, $t=3.80$, 95% CI(0.35, 1.07) and for Whites vs. low identity Blacks, $t=5.46$, 95% CI(0.59, 1.27). This suggests that the difficulty of labeling a film as targeted to Blacks is similar between high and low identity Black respondents, but that White respondents have more difficulty labeling the films as targeted to Blacks, as signified by the larger spread in the curves' difficulty for this group. These results provide further support for Hypothesis 1.

We can also look at the difficulty of the mainstream movies. It appears that high identity Blacks basically find it impossible to classify the mainstream movies as Black-oriented – the slopes actually leave the chart. Taking for example the highest difficulty mainstream movie for high identity Blacks (*Guardians of the Galaxy*) with a difficulty of 5.88. But 5.88 is actually not statistically significant from the other two groups even though the difficulty difference is over 2 standard deviations compared to Whites (3.06) and low identity Blacks (2.11). The reason is the standard errors of the difficulty parameter for the mainstream movies are over ten times larger than for Black oriented movies because so few respondents (White or Black) classify the mainstream movies as Black. Thus, the three groups are statistically equivalent in their categorization of the mainstream films.

Predicting Exposure to Black-oriented movies

Respondent exposure to the Black-oriented movies was predicted using multiple regression. Our hypotheses were whether an adolescents' exposure to the Black-oriented movies could be predicted by their race, whether they perceived the films to be targeted toward Black or White audiences, and their ethnic identity. The independent variables were participant race (Black or White), perceived target audience of the 12 Black-oriented movies, and ethnic identity as a continuous variable (Model 1). Covariates were exposure to the mainstream movies (as a proxy for general media exposure), sensation seeking, participant age, and participant sex. Also tested were the interactions between participant race and perceived target audience (Model 2), between participant race and ethnic identity (Model 3), and the three-way interaction between participant race, perceived target audience, and ethnic identity (Model 4). Variables were not centered or standardized when part of an interaction; simple effects are computed post hoc. Detailed results can be found in Table 1.

The results indicate a significant difference between Black and White adolescents on their exposure to the Black-oriented movies, such that Black adolescents were more likely to report exposure than White adolescents, supporting Hypothesis 3. There was also a significant effect of perceived target audience on exposure to Black-oriented movies, such that the more movies a participant correctly identified as being Black-oriented the more exposure to Black movies he or she reported. There was not a significant effect of ethnic identity on exposure to Black-oriented movies.

The interaction between participant race and perceived target audience predicting exposure to the Black-oriented movies was statistically significant and is graphically displayed in Figure 3. Black adolescents begin higher on exposure to Black-oriented movies than White adolescents even when they perceived no Black-oriented movies as being targeted to Black

moviegoers, $b=0.26$, $p<.001$, 95% CI(0.22, 0.30). Both groups increase in their exposure to Black-oriented movies the more they perceive such movies to be targeted toward Black audiences, but the increase is significant only for the Black adolescents [Black $b=0.02$, $p<.001$, 95% CI(0.01, 0.03); White $b=0.01$, $p=.10$, 95% CI(−0.001, 0.02)]. This provides support for Hypothesis 4.

The interaction between participant race and ethnic identity predicting exposure to the Black-oriented movies did not reach statistical significance ($p=.062$). We nonetheless analyze this interaction to clarify the simple effects involved, as distinctiveness theory would predict an effect of identity strength for Black adolescents only. Black adolescents again start higher than White adolescents in their exposure to Black-oriented movies even when they at the lowest in ethnic identity (score of one out of seven), $b=0.24$, $p<.001$, 95% CI(0.18, 0.30). However, there is no significant change in exposure to Black-oriented movies as ethnic identity increases for either group [Black, $b=0.01$, $p=.26$, 95% CI(−0.004, 0.02); White, $b=−0.01$, $p=.13$, 95% CI(−0.02, 0.002)]. The interaction is likely driven not by the slopes but by the fact that the difference between the groups is slightly larger at the highest level of identity (seven), $b=0.32$, $p<.001$, 95% CI(0.27, 0.37). Hypothesis 5 was not supported and future research should attempt to replicate this pattern. Additionally, an exploratory three-way interaction between participant race, perceived target audience, and ethnic identity was not significant.

Discussion

Black-oriented content is a media category that has implications for many audience outcomes (Abrams & Giles, 2007; Dal Cin et al., 2013; Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016; Schooler et al., 2004). Understanding how the audience perceives such content may have consequences not only for media effects but also for the ways that Black-oriented media are marketed in the future. Adolescents, in particular, make up a large subset of the media audience and are experiencing identity processes that may impact the way they perceive and respond to Black-oriented media (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016; Jordan et al., 2010; Phinney, 1989).

The results from IRT analysis suggest that Black adolescents distinguish between Black-oriented and mainstream media in terms of to whom they expect such content is targeted. Black adolescents find it easier than White adolescents to label most Black-oriented movies as targeted primarily to Black audiences. This is especially the case when they have strong ethnic identities. As spoofed by the *Saturday Night Live* skit “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black”, White adolescents do not seem to notice that some content is primarily targeted toward Black audiences, and therefore may not be intended for them. Even more telling is the fact that White adolescents report lower exposure to the Black-oriented media. This indicates that they do not need to see a film to decide that it is for them – to some extent, this assumption may be fairly automatic. Additionally, the Black adolescents report relatively high exposure to both kinds of content. This replicates previous research suggesting that Black adolescents watch both mainstream and Black-oriented content (Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016), and our results suggest that they differentiate between the two in a way that White adolescents do not. These results corroborate the predictions of distinctiveness theory

suggesting that minority audiences are more cognizant of identity-relevant information than majority audiences, especially when they have strong group identity (McGuire et al., 1978; Phinney, 1992).

White respondents report less exposure to Black-oriented movies than Black adolescents. This may be more about marketing strategy than it is about preferences. There is a small contingent of White adolescents with high exposure to Black-oriented media, and that group represents an interesting special population for future study. However, in general, the White adolescents report low exposure to nearly all the Black-oriented movies, and yet their assessments of their target audience are more evenly spread across the perceived target axis than the assessments of Black adolescents are. There is therefore a disconnect between perception and behavior, such that White adolescents often perceive Black-oriented media as being for them, and yet they still do not watch it.

One possible explanation is that White adolescents do not receive as many marketing messages about the Black-oriented content as Black adolescents do. This is because Black-oriented content has historically been marketed toward primarily Black audiences (Dal Cin et al., 2013; Darden & Bayton, 1977; Licata & Biswas, 1993), so the channels and contexts of the marketing messages are more likely to reach Black audiences. This may also be a reinforcing process, whereby audiences in a theater to watch a Black-oriented movie may be more likely to be shown trailers for future Black-oriented movies. Perceptions that a movie is targeted toward the self is a first step in being interested in seeing that movie, and it is possible that with stronger marketing to a wider audience that interest would follow. Although White adolescents are not seeing the Black-targeted movies en masse, they are still seeing them sometimes, and likely constitute an untapped market of moviegoers. The mainstream success of television shows with majority Black casts (e.g., *Empire*, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Blackish*) among White audiences stands as a contrast to the lesser success of Black-driven film, with one possible difference being the way content is marketed toward non-Black audiences. It is a marketing challenge to convince broader audiences that they should be interested in these types of movies in the same way as they are in television.

Implications for Practice

The Hollywood establishment and media producers debate about their diversity and inclusion practices, and examples such as the #OscarsSoWhite controversy abound (Griggs, 2016, January 14; Hunt et al., 2014; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Part of this debate lies in the fact that although Black-oriented and other group-specific media have been produced regularly for a long time, such content hardly ever reaches prominence in popular culture. This is likely due in large part to the marketing strategies for Black-oriented content – it is generally targeted fairly narrowly based on what distributors think will be most profitable (Havens, 2002). However, the present results suggest that it could perhaps be economically viable to market such content toward broader audiences and contexts. If this is the case, it could open doors for future creation of content with greater diversity in both cast and theme.

The perception held by some White audiences that all content is and should be targeted toward them has historically been one of the barriers to true diversity in media. For much of

media history, a preponderance of content – including content with Black characters – was created by White producers and with an eye toward the sensibilities of White audiences (Boyd, 1997; Havens, 2002; Jhally & Lewis, 1992). The result was a distinct lack of authentic (e.g., non-stereotypic) representation of Black culture, dialect, humor, and settings (Havens, 2002; Jhally & Lewis, 1992). The difficult task, therefore, will be to find the right balance for marketing genuine Black-oriented content more broadly while also retaining the aspects of that content that distinguishes it meaningfully from mainstream content. White perceptions that Black-oriented content is not necessarily only for Black audiences should lead not to changes in content, but to changes in how marketing messages for that content are targeted.

Limitations

These data are cross-sectional, so although we can rely on distinctiveness theory for some causal direction, we cannot make causal claims. For example, it is possible that exposure to the Black-oriented movies drives perception of them as targeted to Black audiences. In all likelihood, there is a dynamic process where perceptions and exposure reinforce one another (Slater, 2007, 2015). Also, our data was limited to including sex as a covariate in analysis and lacked the ability to tackle race and gender intersectionality (Shields, 2008). We also simplified the racial categories by removing those who indicated a category of “other” (which included mixed race) and those who also indicated Hispanic origins. This means that we can draw conclusions about those who report a single primary identity as Black or White, but not those with competing identities. Future research may wish to include such variability in perspective.

Additionally, it should be noted that the three mainstream films used for comparison in the IRT analysis were all of the same genre (action/adventure), while the Black-oriented movies were of various genres. It is possible that genre played some role as a confound in the analysis. That said, it is unclear how genre would have influenced the results based on race and ethnic identity, as well as by whether participants had seen the films. It is possible that certain groups are drawn to certain genres; however, it is more likely that the effects are driven mostly by the Black-oriented vs. mainstream distinction. Future research may wish to consider the genres of the mainstream comparison films more carefully in order to avoid this possible confound.

Finally, we did not include measures of racial attitudes or motivation to respond without prejudice. It is possible that one or both of these impacted the way that White respondents categorized the films. In particular, Whites who saw this as a test of racial attitudes may have been more likely to say Black movies are of interest to all audiences, inflating our conclusions about White perceptions of targeting. However, the large variability between movies in responses suggests that White participants were differentiating to at least some degree between movies and not simply labeling every film as for all audiences. However, future research may wish to include measures of racial attitudes and motivation.

Conclusion

Black-oriented media tends to be targeted toward Black audiences. However, it is unclear if and how audiences perceive the distinctions between Black-oriented and mainstream media content that producers, distributors, and researchers anticipate. The results of the present study suggest that while Black adolescents (especially those high in ethnic identity) are in tune with the idea that Black-oriented content is targeted toward them, White adolescents do not report such distinctions. There may therefore be an opportunity to market Black-oriented content more broadly than previously expected. Encouraging authentic diversity of race, perspective, and culture in mainstream media is a worthy goal, and it may be that Black-oriented and other target-specific content really can be for everyone.

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Figure 1. Perceived audience and exposure for Black and White and High and Low Identity Black adolescents.

Figure 2.
IRT graphs comparing Black and White and low and high identity Black adolescents.

Figure 3.

Line graph depicting the interaction between participant race and perceived target audience of Black-oriented movies predicting exposure to Black-oriented movies.

Table 1

Regression results predicting exposure to Black-oriented movies.

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	95% CI
Participant race (Black=1)	0.29	16.93	(.25, .32)	0.25	10.10	(.20, .29)	0.23	6.47	(.16, .30)	0.21	3.88	(.10, .31)
Perceived Black-oriented target	0.02	6.08	(.01, .02)	0.01	1.65	(-.001, .02)	0.02	5.95	(.01, .02)	0.02	1.85	(-.001, .04)
Ethnic identity	-0.00	-0.28	(-.01, .01)	-0.00	-0.37	(-.01, .01)	-0.01	-1.51	(-.02, .002)	-0.002	-0.29	(-.01, .01)
Mainstream exposure	0.21	15.67	(.18, .24)	0.21	15.81	(.19, .24)	0.21	15.70	(.18, .24)	0.21	15.84	(.19, .24)
Age	0.02	2.27	(.002, .03)	0.02	2.36	(.003, .03)	0.02	2.33	(.003, .03)	0.02	2.38	(.003, .03)
Sex (Female=1)	0.06	3.77	(.03, .09)	0.06	3.64	(.03, .09)	0.06	3.83	(.03, .09)	0.06	3.70	(.03, .09)
Sensation-seeking	0.03	3.31	(.01, .04)	0.03	3.33	(.01, .04)	0.03	3.31	(.01, .04)	0.03	3.31	(.01, .04)
Race*Target	--	--	--	0.01	2.38	(.002, .02)	--	--	--	0.004	0.31	(-.02, .03)
Race*Identity	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.01	1.86	(-.0001, .03)	0.01	0.91	(-.01, .03)
Target*Identity	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.002	-1.25	(-.01, .001)
Race*Target *Identity	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.002	0.74	(-.003, .01)