

Ethnic-Racial Representation in Screen Media

From a very young age, most American children are consuming hours of media content every day. There is little doubt that all those hours of media have a meaningful influence on how we view and treat people, including people from our own and other ethnic-racial groups. Like interest added to a bank account, small media deposits are compounded across multiple exposures throughout the day and over a lifetime. These deposits begin early in life and occur throughout children's development. It is important that we all understand what children are actually seeing, including *how* and *how often* ethnic-racial groups are depicted in the media.

At Common Sense, we believe that diverse representations matter, and it's important for all kids and families to see themselves accurately reflected in the media they consume. The following fact sheets provide a snapshot of how Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim, Native American, and White people are currently represented on-screen, and how those depictions may affect audiences. One important note is that media often treat ethnic-racial groups as monolithic; however, it is important to recognize that there is tremendous diversity within groups. People with family histories from different countries and regions often differ by their lived experience in the United States, including by income, education, and the stereotypical beliefs they face that are held by others. The data presented here, while valuable, still has a long way to go to represent that diversity.

Resources

For additional information on children, media, and diversity, check out these resources:

Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/aii>

Center for Media & Social Impact

<https://cmsimpact.org/>

The Center for Scholars & Storytellers

<https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/>

EmbraceRace

<https://www.embracerace.org/>

Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/>

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

<https://seejane.org/>

Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences (University of Washington) learning modules

Part 1: <https://modules.ilabs.uw.edu/module/race-today-what-kids-know-as-they-grow/>

Part 2: <https://modules.ilabs.uw.edu/module/racing-towards-equality-why-talking-to-your-kids-about-race-is-good-for-everyone/>

RespectAbility

<https://www.respectability.org/>

Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

<https://www.writeinclusion.org/>

We Need Diverse Books

<https://diversebooks.org>

Asian Representation in Screen Media

How often are Asian people represented?

Asian Americans make up 6% of the total U.S. population.¹ In the following media, they make up ...

Children's Television	Film Roles			Television Roles					Video Games	
TV shows (age 2 to 13, human characters) ²	Top-grossing ³	Speaking ⁴	Co/Lead Netflix ⁵	TV ⁶	Lead network ⁶	Lead cable ⁶	Lead streaming ⁶	Co/Lead Netflix series ⁵	Covers ⁷	Ads ⁸
5%	5%	8%	4%	4%	2%	3%	2%	1%	5%	7%

Asians are more likely to be represented in sci-fi and drama, and less likely to be seen in comedies and reality shows.⁹

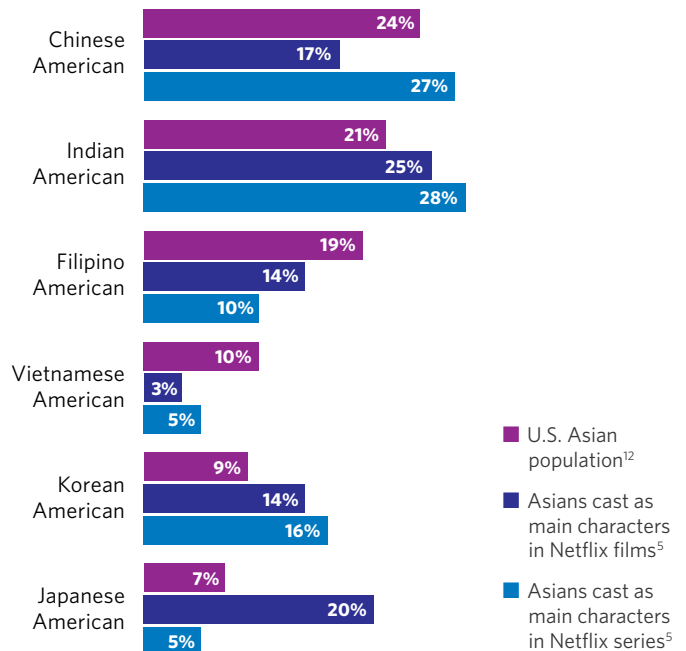
What are the representations like?

Genre	Depiction
Movies ^{4,11}	25% of Asian women are depicted in a sexualized fashion.
YouTube ¹⁰	59% of videos featuring Asians contained stereotypes, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unassimilated or foreign • Work-oriented • Socially awkward • Tech-savvy • A model minority • An economic threat
Video game ads & covers ^{7,8}	Disproportionately pictured: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacting violence • Appearing with a weapon, particularly swords • As martial arts fighters

POSITIVE BUT NARROW DEPICTIONS: A Note About the Model Minority

- The “model minority” refers to a stereotype of Asians as polite, hard-working, intelligent, and high-achieving.
- While many of these representations can be considered “positive,” they are still stereotypical, and they are narrow and limiting.

Among the six largest Asian origin groups in the United States,* percent of Asian main characters** in Netflix films and series, compared to percent of U.S. Asian population:



*Numbers do not total 100% because any one individual could identify with one or more Asian origin groups.

**Actors featured may not be American.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: High-Quality Representations



Crazy Rich Asians is the first Hollywood feature set entirely in the present with an all-Asian cast. Rachel, the main character, is a positive representation for Asian Americans and women: She's strong, confident, and in control. The cinematography challenges the idea that Asian men are undesirable. By comparing the characters' philosophies, it shows that the “American” way isn't the only way.

Media representations often fail to reflect/identify the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups that comprise these broad ethnic-racial labels, and as a result, the unique identities and experiences of these groups may be overlooked.

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Black/African American Representation in Screen Media

How often are Black/African American people represented?

Black/African Americans make up **12%** of the total U.S. population.¹ In the following media, they make up ...

Children's Television	Film Roles			Television Roles					Video Games	
TV shows (age 2 to 13, human characters) ²	Top-grossing ³	Speaking ⁴	Co/Lead Netflix ⁵	TV ⁶	Lead network ⁶	Lead cable ⁶	Lead streaming ⁶	Co/Lead Netflix series ⁵	Covers ⁷	Ads ⁸
15%	16%	17%	18%	16%	12%	14%	5%	9%	7%	8%

What are the representations like?


Genre	Depiction
Movies ⁴	Almost one-third of Black women are sexualized.
Scripted television	Disproportionately portrayed as overweight, unintelligent, morally questionable, and not to be admired. ^{9,10} About one-half do not hold professional status, and women are shown with lower professional standing than men. ¹¹
TV news ^{12,13}	Overrepresented as violent perpetrators in national but not always in local news. Underrepresented as victims in national but not always in local news.
YouTube ¹⁴	61% of videos with Black characters contained stereotypes (e.g., as criminal, unintelligent, poor, athletic).
Video game ads & covers ^{7,8}	Disproportionately depicted with guns, as very muscular, as aggressive and violent, and as athletes.

How do these representations affect people?

Exposure to Stereotypical Portrayals	
For Black audiences among ...	For White audiences among ...
High school students ... ¹⁵ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower academic performance Lower perceived ability in science Lower college-oriented career aspirations 	Adults ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative perceptions^{18-30,32} Increased stereotyping¹⁸⁻²⁶ Decreased support for policies and political candidates that support Black Americans^{26,30,32,33}
Adults ... ^{16,17} <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More negative views toward one's own racial group 	

Exposure to High-Quality Portrayals	
For Black audiences among ...	For White audiences among ...
Elementary school children ... ³⁵⁻³⁶ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher self-esteem More positive self-concept (feelings about status, appearance) 	Adults ... ^{11,25,27,29,30,32,34} <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreased stereotyping Increased support for policies that address discrimination
High school students ... ³⁷ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater satisfaction with appearance 	
Adults ... ^{16,17} <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher self-esteem Positive attitudes about Black Americans 	

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: High-Quality Representations



Hidden Figures: Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy studied, worked hard, and persevered in engineering, a field in which few women—much less women of color—excelled in the 1950s and 1960s. And they don't let obvious and overt racism stop them.

Media representations often fail to reflect/identify the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups that comprise these broad ethnic-racial labels, and as a result, the unique identities and experiences of these groups may be overlooked.

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Hispanic/Latino Representation in Screen Media

How often are Hispanic/Latino people represented?

Hispanic/Latino Americans make up **19%** of the total U.S. population.¹ In the following media, they make up ...

Children's Television	Film Roles			Television Roles					Video Games	
TV shows (age 2 to 13, human characters) ²	Top-grossing ³	Speaking ⁴	Co/Lead Netflix ⁵	TV ⁶	Lead network ⁶	Lead cable ⁶	Lead streaming ⁶	Co/Lead Netflix series ⁵	Covers ⁷	Ads ⁸
8%	5%	5%	6%	6%	7%	6%	6%	4%	0%	1%

What are the representations like?

Genre	Depiction
Movies⁹	Often depicted as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminals • Law enforcement officers • Maids or laborers • Sexualized (for women)
Scripted television¹⁰⁻¹²	Compared to others, often portrayed as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less intelligent/respected/articulate • Lower status • More likely to have an accent • More sexualized (for women)
TV news^{9,13-17}	Rarely seen. When they are, it's about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undocumented immigration • Crime (underrepresented as victims/officers) • Poverty, welfare, government assistance programs • Threats to the safety, norms, and values of U.S. citizens
YouTube¹⁸	83% of portrayals contain stereotypes (e.g., criminality, unwillingness to acculturate).
Video game ads & covers^{7,8}	Portrayed as more aggressive and violent than White characters.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: High-Quality Representations



Colorful, beautifully animated, and culturally sensitive, *Coco* is a multilayered coming-of-age drama and a tribute to Mexican traditions and customs. The movie has an all-star Latino voice cast and co-director.

How do these representations affect people?

Effects on children and adolescents are understudied. Research about adults suggests ...

Exposure to Stereotypical Portrayals	
For Hispanic/Latino adult audiences ¹⁹⁻²²	For White adult audiences ^{12,23-26}
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More negative views toward one's own ethnic group, including group standing in society • Less belief in one's ability • Lower self-esteem • Can lead to shame which can encourage distancing from the group, and support for policies that are unsupportive of Latinos • Can also lead to anger about the media's portrayal of the group, which can encourage affiliation with the group and support for favorable policies toward Latinos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased negative views and stereotyping of Latinos (e.g., as criminal, unintelligent, undocumented) • Negative emotions (anxiety and contempt) • Decreased support for policies that benefit Latinos • More support for severe crime penalties

Exposure to High-Quality Portrayals	
For Hispanic/Latino adult audiences ^{19,27}	For White adult audiences ²⁸
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More positive views toward one's own ethnic group • Higher levels of self-esteem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced stereotyping • More constructive evaluations of Latinos in society

Media representations often fail to reflect/identify the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups that comprise these broad ethnic-racial labels, and as a result, the unique identities and experiences of these groups may be overlooked.

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Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim Representation in Screen Media

How often are Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim people represented?

Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim Americans make up **1 to 2%** of the total U.S. population.¹⁻³ In the following media, they make up ...

Children's Television	Film Roles			Television Roles					Video Games	
TV shows (age 2 to 13, human characters) ⁴	Top-grossing ⁵	Speaking ⁶	Co/Lead Netflix ⁷	TV ⁸	Lead network ⁸	Lead cable ⁸	Lead streaming ⁸	Co/Lead Netflix series ⁷	Covers ⁹	Ads ¹⁰
< 1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	< 1%	< 1%	3%	1%	Not measured	

Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim subpopulations are often grouped together in the media. However, this type of representation fails to reflect a diverse religion and many different ethnicities.

What are the representations like?

Genre	Depiction
News ^{11,12}	<p>Stereotypes include themes of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence • Threat • Terrorism • Extremism • Religious fundamentalism • Oppression <p>For women, stereotypes include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjugation • Victimization

How do these representations affect people?

Exposure to Stereotypical Portrayals	
For Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim American adult audiences ¹³⁻¹⁵	For White adult audiences ^{16,17}
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased desire for collective action to improve the status of the group • Reduced identification with American identity and increased distrust in the U.S. government • Reduced desire for acceptance by other Americans • More likely to avoid interactions with White Americans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased prejudice, negative attitudes • Increased stereotyping about violence and aggression • Increased support for military action in Muslim countries • Increased support for policies against Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim Americans

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: High-Quality Representations



Ramy is a man with one foot in the traditional Muslim world and one in the space inhabited by metropolitan millennials. Every character in this series is given humanity and agency. Ramy, his friends, and his family all talk about race, ethnicity, and religion. One of the most powerful aspects of *Ramy* is the focus on the expectations on women in the Muslim culture.

Exposure to High-Quality Portrayals

For White adult audiences ¹⁷
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased positive attitudes toward Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim Americans • Decreased support for policies against Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim Americans

Media representations often fail to reflect/identify the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups that comprise these broad ethnic-racial labels, and as a result, the unique identities and experiences of these groups may be overlooked.

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Native American Representation in Screen Media

How often are Native American people represented?

Native Americans make up approximately 1% of the total U.S. population.^{1,2} In the following media, they make up ...

Children's Television	Film Roles			Television Roles					Video Games	
TV shows (age 2 to 13, human characters) ³	Top-grossing ⁴	Speaking ⁵	Co/Lead Netflix ⁶	TV ⁷	Lead network ⁷	Lead cable ⁷	Lead streaming ⁷	Co/Lead Netflix series ⁶	Covers ⁸	Ads ⁹
< 1%	< 1%	< 1%	0%	< 1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	Not measured	2%

What are the representations like?

Genre	Depiction
YouTube ¹⁰	<p>Most representations occur in a contemporary setting, outside of reservations, and do not contain stereotypes. However, stereotyped images included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warriors • Wise elders • Princesses • Militant activists • Lower-income • Passive, quiet • Less articulate but respected by others

How do these representations affect people?

Exposure to Stereotypical Portrayals	
For Native American audiences ¹¹	For White adult audiences ¹²
<p>Among high school students ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower self-esteem regarding appearance, performance • More negative view of community worth <p>Among college students ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More narrow perceptions of future possibilities • More narrow aspirations for achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More negative views of Native Americans • Stereotyped images of poverty

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: High-Quality Representations



As the very first kids' TV series with an Alaska Native lead character, *Molly of Denali* centers around a girl who learns about the Indigenous experience through travels around the state and encounters with its people. The show's creative team includes Indigenous advisors, voice actors, and production personnel.

Exposure to High-Quality Portrayals

For White adult audiences¹²

- More positive views of Native Americans

Media representations often fail to reflect/identify the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups that comprise these broad ethnic-racial labels, and as a result, the unique identities and experiences of these groups may be overlooked.

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White Representation in Screen Media

How often are White people represented?

White Americans make up 62% of the total U.S. population.¹ In the following media, they make up ...

Children's Television	Film Roles			Television Roles					Video Games	
TV shows (age 2 to 13, human characters) ³	Top-grossing ⁴	Speaking ⁵	Co/Lead Netflix ⁶	TV ⁷	Lead network ⁷	Lead cable ⁷	Lead streaming ⁷	Co/Lead Netflix series ⁶	Covers ⁸	Ads ⁹
75%	67%	64%	64%	63%	76%	65%	76%	77%	78%	82%

White people are presented more frequently, more positively, and in more diverse roles than people of color, including Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Muslim, Arab, and other populations.

What are the representations like?

Genre	Depiction
Children's television	Compared to other races and ethnicities, portrayed as less violent. ² White adult characters are portrayed as more actively engaged in learning than adults of color in shows focused on science, technology, math, or engineering. ¹⁰
Movies⁴	Female characters often depicted as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexualized • Provocatively dressed
Scripted television^{11,12}	Portrayed as intelligent
TV news¹³	Overrepresented as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homicide victims • Police officers
Video game ads & covers	Female characters are sexualized and provocatively dressed. ⁸ Male characters are often the sole or primary characters. ⁷ Portrayed as less aggressive and violent than Asian and Hispanic/Latino characters. ⁷

Media representations often fail to reflect/identify the diversity of ethnic and cultural groups that comprise these broad ethnic-racial labels, and as a result, the unique identities and experiences of these groups may be overlooked.

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