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Watching *Black Panther* with racially diverse youth: relationships between film viewing, ethnicity, ethnic identity, empowerment, and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Black Panther (2018) offers scholars a unique opportunity to measure the potential positive influence of the film on American youth, particularly youth of color. Past research demonstrated that, for African Americans, greater ethnic identity is associated with greater wellbeing and empowerment, findings we replicated here. We also studied the influence of the film on wellbeing and empowerment, considering the roles of ethnicity and character identification. Results showed a main effect of film on empowerment but not wellbeing in the entire sample, with no main effect or interaction with ethnicity. Further analysis by individual ethnic group revealed increased wellbeing for Asian American and Black/African American youth, and increased empowerment for Black/African American youth after film viewing. Identification with the character T'Challa/Black Panther was high across the sample and interacted positively with film on empowerment for Black/African American participants. This study demonstrates the potential for film to enhance and empower youth, particularly Black/African American youth, and raises intriguing questions about how the experience differs by ethnicity.

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Stories from popular culture influence young people's sense of identity, provide information about how they are understood by society, and teach them what they can expect as a member of their social group.[1] When a particular group is underrepresented in popular culture, especially in heroic or other positive roles, their exclusion sends the message that those excluded are "less than" those who are better represented, impacting audiences' self-concepts, world perceptions, and ambitions.[2] Hollywood has generally featured white protagonists. For example, since 2008, Marvel has released 19 films centered on a specific hero, but only one of those heroes, Black Panther, is not white.[3] Much research has documented the hegemony of dominant groups and the intersections of those groups (e.g., white, male, cisgender, and heterosexual) as protagonists in popular media.[4] *Black Panther* (2018) is novel in the degree to which it features characters of African descent almost exclusively.

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Identity is socially constructed. Via popular culture, we learn others' beliefs of us and construct our identities based, in part, on this feedback. Social cognitive theory posits that we learn about the consequences of our attitudes and actions through vicarious reinforcement and punishment of modeled behavior.[5] This feedback loop exists not only within the film, but also outside of it, in our face-to-face experiences. *Black Panther*'s impact comes both from its story and characters and from the place the film occupies in the public consciousness.

Within the film, *Black Panther* disrupts traditional hegemony by showing a vision of what could be possible for Africans and Black/African Americans if they were not held back by access to wealth or by systemic inequality. Outside the film, the cultural discussion focuses in part on the historical instance of broadcasting this vision to the world and seeing how popular it is with audiences of multiple races, as its commercial success attested: in 2018, *Black Panther* was the highest grossing film domestically[6] and the second one worldwide.[7]

Black Panther and the popular conversation that the film generated can be seen through the lens of ethnolinguistic vitality theory (EV)[8] as applied to mediated contact. Evidence suggests that parasocial contact with story characters (i.e., establishing an apparent relationship) influences the actual and perceived vitality of a systemically marginalized ethnic group. In the case of *Black Panther*, the main characters and the culture of Wakanda are depicted as vital, and EV predicts increased vitality to viewers whose ethnic identities are represented in the film.[9]

Our study explores how a sample of teenagers of predominantly Black/African American, Hispanic American, or Asian American origin reacted to the film *Black Panther*, especially in relation to strength of ethnic identification and identification with the film's hero and how those related to empowerment and wellbeing. We wanted to hear the voices of adolescents because at this developmental stage, individuals are actively in the process of constructing their identities. Influential formative experiences, such as watching an inspiring film, help shape who adolescents become as they move into adulthood.[10] Our sample included those who might identify with the film's hero due to racial similarity or due to their shared ethnic minority status and common history as members of historically vilified groups.

There are many reasons an individual may identify with a social group that has been historically and systemically maligned; thus, the question of identification is nuanced. However, scholars have often used demographic similarity to study identification with characters.[11] For this reason, we wondered whether Black/African American participants might identify more strongly with *Black Panther*'s hero and therefore be more strongly influenced by the film.

Narrative influence on real life

Studies have demonstrated that stories, including those that are fictional, can influence beliefs, attitudes, personality, and behavior.[12] Research has shown that when one gets "lost" in a story, one is more likely to be moved by the story and persuaded by messages embedded within it. Research has also shown that narrative engagement and identification with story characters are linked.[13] Simply put, when "transported" by a story, we tend to identify with a character and take on that character's goals and motivations to the point

that we may change our perspective to that of the character with whom we identify.[14] Hence, the more one engages with a story, the more likely one will be persuaded by its content.

Negative media representation results in a reduced sense of agency, lower self-esteem, and a poorer self-concept valuation for members of groups that are portrayed negatively.[15] Meanwhile, the dominant majority enjoys an enhanced sense of agency and higher levels of self-esteem and self-concept valuation.[16] A study about the representation of disadvantaged ethnic groups in film found that stereotypical representation of the Latino community evoked feelings of guilt, shame, and anger in Mexican American participants while for those white participants with high pride in their racial identity, Latino stereotypical representation in a comedic form produced a more positive emotional reaction.[17]

Historically, popular media have tended to portray Black/African Americans as "uncivilized, illiterate, and/or unintelligent"[18] or as the dangerous "other,"[19] leading viewers to have a poor valuation of the social group as a whole.[20] In recent decades, representation of Black/African Americans in media has improved,[21] moving away from deviant and dangerous stereotypes to portrayals of Black/African Americans as "hard working and intelligent"[22] people with comparable occupations to those of their white counterparts.[23] Evidence suggests that positive representations such as these can foster social change.[24] A recent review of research on media representations of social groups reported that exposure to counterstereotypes of Black/African Americans led to prejudice reduction.[25] Another study found that white participants exposed to positive exemplars of Black/African Americans were more likely to say they would vote for an Black/African American political candidate than a white political candidate with the same credentials.[26]

Black Panther as a moment in American storytelling

In the case of *Black Panther*, we expected that the portrayal of Black African characters as powerful, benevolent, attractive, and smart would benefit Black/African American youth and potentially other youth from marginalized ethnic groups. Previous work found that, for ethnic minorities, but not whites, greater ethnic identification predicted greater empowerment and wellbeing.[27] Our study tested whether this prediction would hold true for Black/African American adolescents and whether watching *Black Panther* would also increase wellbeing and empowerment for Black/African American youth differentially. Having a precedent for only for Black/African American participants in the literature, we asked research questions about whether these findings would extend to other ethnicities. Additionally, since evidence suggests that perceived similarity with a story character is positively associated with an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully imitate a modeled behavior,[28] we expected that recognizing the self and the story's main characters as belonging to the same social group would have a positive effect on the Black/African American participants' self-concept.

Our ethnically diverse youth sample were high academic achievers (see Method section). We believed this sample characteristic is interesting because we examined empowerment and wellbeing in a current youth sample for whom there is substantial hope for personal advancement, but who are still part of ethnic groups that experience marginalization.

The Current Study

H1: Ethnic identification in Black/African American youth is positively related to both wellbeing and psychological empowerment.

H2: Exposure to *Black Panther* will differentially increase empowerment and wellbeing in Black/African American youth compared to other ethnicities.

RQ: Will exposure to *Black Panther* increase empowerment and wellbeing in a sample of racially diverse youth in general and by race?

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 145$) were rising American high school seniors between the ages of 15 and 20 ($Mdn = 17$) who had been accepted into the 2018 Leadership, Education and Development (LEAD) cohort. LEAD provides an environment for high academic achieving students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to interact in a supportive setting with ethnically diverse leaders.[29] Participants were attending a 2–3-week summer campus residency at one of six major universities across the U.S.A. when they participated in the study. Participants' average GPA was 3.2, ranging from 2.8 to 3.9, with 60% participating in Advanced Placement courses. They represent a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds with an annual household income range of approximately US$40K–400K.

Fielding Graduate University's Institutional Review Board approved the study. Written consent was obtained in advance from the parents/legal guardians. Participants ($n = 124$; 21 removed for insufficient data) were 36% Black/African American, 26% Asian American, 24% Hispanic American, 8% White, and 6% Multiracial.

Design and procedure

This study used a pretest–post-test experimental design. One of the authors watched the film with participants at each site and was present while participants completed surveys on their mobile phones immediately before and after film viewing. Both surveys measured wellbeing, empowerment, and ethnic identification; the pretest measured demographics and the post-test measured identification.

Apparatus and materials

Wellbeing was measured using the Psychological and Relational Factors of the BBC Wellbeing Scale ($\alpha = .95$).[30] Empowerment was measured using the same measures as reported by Lisa A. Molix and B. Ann Bettencourt in their Psychological Empowerment Scale,[31] a mean composite of the Desirability of Control Scale ($\alpha = .78$, 17 items),[32] the General Self-Efficacy Scale ($\alpha = .87$, 10 items),[33] the Hopefulness Measure ($\alpha = .85$, 2 items),[34] and the Personal Mastery Measure ($\alpha = .72$, 7 items).[35] Ethnic identification was measured using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure ($\alpha = .92$, 6 items).[36] Instructions were revised for brevity, and four questions were removed from the Desirability of Control Scale[37] because they would not apply to a young sample.

Character identification items were adapted from Loris Vezzali et al.'s measure of wishful identification with Harry Potter and Voldemort.[38] The phrases "I'd like to be

Table 1. Strength of prefilm ethnic identification predicts of wellbeing and empowerment.

	Wellbeing			Empowerment		
Ethnicity	β	Adj. R^2	p	β	Adj. R^2	p
White	.00	−.12	.98	−.02	−.12	.92
Hispanic American	.21	.05	.12	.15	.01	.25
Black/African American*	.26	.11	.01	.23	.14	.01
Asian American	.15	−.01	.42	.19	.04	.14
Multiracial	−.45	.17	.20	−.34	.15	.21

* Significant.

like …" and "I wish I could be more similar to …" were reworded to read "T'Challa/Black Panther" and "Erik Killmonger."

Results

To test H1, we ran regression analyses with prefilm ethnic identification as the predictor and prefilm wellbeing and empowerment as the criteria (see Table 1). Ethnic identification was a significant predictor of wellbeing, $F(1, 43) = 6.71$, $p < .05$, and empowerment for Black/African American students only, $F(1, 43) = 6.708$, $p < .05$. Therefore, H1 was supported.

To address H2, we first ran a mixed ANOVA with film exposure (pre and post) as a repeated measures factor. Two Black/African American participants were excluded from the wellbeing and empowerment analyses due to missing post data. Results showed a significant effect of film exposure on both wellbeing, $F(1,121) = 12$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and empowerment $F(1,121) = 12.03$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$ for the whole sample. We then ran the same analysis using ethnicity as a between-subjects factor. Within-subjects contrasts revealed a main effect of film exposure on empowerment, $F(1,117) = 5.65$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .046$, but not on wellbeing, and no significant interaction between ethnicity and film on wellbeing or empowerment.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Ethnicity		Mean	SD	*N*
White	Prewellbeing	4.11	.62	10
	Postwellbeing	4.01	.59	10
	Pre-empowerment	4.48	.55	10
	Postempowerment	4.45	.60	10
Hispanic American	Prewellbeing	4.10	.63	30
	Postwellbeing	4.25	.70	30
	Pre-empowerment	4.29	.61	30
	Postempowerment	4.35	.54	30
Black/African American*	Prewellbeing	3.87	.67	43
	Postwellbeing*	4.02	.72	43
	Pre-empowerment	4.13	.55	43
	Postempowerment*	4.33	.51	43
Asian American	Prewellbeing	3.62	.62	32
	Postwellbeing*	3.80	.61	32
	Pre-empowerment	4.05	.44	32
	Postempowerment	4.20	.47	32
Multiracial	Prewellbeing	3.92	.91	7
	Postwellbeing	3.83	1.07	7
	Pre-empowerment	4.30	.69	7
	Postempowerment	4.50	.93	7

* Pre–post change was significant at $p < .05$.

As a post-hoc analysis, we isolated each individual race group. We found a main effect of film exposure on wellbeing only for Black/African American, $F(1,42) = 7.58$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = .153$, and Asian American participants, $F(1,31) = 7.23$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = .189$. The main effect of film on empowerment was significant only for Black/African American participants, $F(1,42) = 8.99$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = .176$. These effects were all positive. Thus, we found support for H2 and ethnic differences that spoke to our RQ (see Table 2).

Regardless of ethnicity, participants identified highly with *Black Panther*'s hero T'Challa ($M = 3.98$; $SD = .92$). We ran a repeated-measures analysis to test whether identification with the hero (recoded as low or high) interacted with film exposure on wellbeing and empowerment. The interaction was significant for changes in empowerment but not for changes in wellbeing for Black/African American participants, $F(2,39) = 5.39$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = .217$.

A linear regression between identification with T'Challa and changes in wellbeing showed significance for Hispanic Americans, but the correlation was negative, $\beta = -.21$, $R^2 = 15\%$, $F(1, 28) = 6.11$, $p < .05$. Another linear regression between identification with T'Challa and changes in empowerment was significant for Hispanic American ($\beta = .14$, $R^2 = 10.7\%$, $F(1, 28) = 7.90$, $p < .05$) and Black/African American participants ($\beta = .17$, $R^2 = 14\%$, $F(1, 42) = 7.90$, $p < .05$). There were no significant findings for identification with Killmonger.

Discussion

In this study, we replicated findings that greater ethnic identification predicts greater wellbeing and empowerment in African Americans,[39] extending these findings to a sample of high academic achieving Black/African American youth. We found that viewing *Black Panther* increased empowerment but not wellbeing in our sample in general, and that there was no interaction with ethnicity. However, post-hoc analyses run solely on individual ethnic group data indicated that the film's effect on wellbeing was significant for Black/African American and Asian American participants only and that the film's effect on empowerment was significant for Black/African American participants only. These results suggest the film was particularly empowering for Black African American youth, and they raise questions about how youth of other ethnicities might be influenced, including how other intersecting audience demographics might play a role.

Within *Black Panther*, we encounter representations of highly prosperous and respected Black Africans. Outside the film, from a meta-analytic perspective, we see—via high box-office statistics—how popular this vision is with all the ethnicities represented in this study. Our data suggest that the internal and meta-visions offered by the film positively influenced Black/African American youth and that *Black Panther* was inspirational in a personal way to youth in general. A caveat to our findings is that it is only one way to statistically test the role of ethnicity. Furthermore, a major weakness of this study is the small sample size of each ethnic group. Only the Black/African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American subgroups contained 30 subjects, which is what is traditionally needed for inferential statistics. The post-hoc analyses should be taken with a grain of salt—which also applies to the identification findings by race. Nevertheless, our findings are indicative of the need for research that focuses on audiences of color and what the shift toward more positive representations in media and popular culture means to them.

Identification

Another facet of the film we explored was identification with both the hero and the antihero/villain. T'Challa epitomizes the highly desirable fictional character, strong in body and character, and typically provoking stronger identification.[40] Our participants uniformly identified with T'Challa regardless of ethnicity. Again, this is evidence of the cultural value of the film. Identification with Killmonger is also worthy of a much longer exploration than we have the luxury of providing here. Killmonger is the only Black/African American character heavily featured in the film and, thus, may be seen by many in our sample as representing a Black/African American experience that includes displacement, neglect, mistreatment, and suffering. However, Killmonger is a complex character and our participants are likely to have seen him in different ways.

Notably, we measured identification specifically as wishful identification by adapting items from a previous study that measured wishful identification with the main hero and villain of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.[41] In the case of Killmonger, a measure of wishful identification may be deceiving. Given the complexity of the character and his presentation as the antihero in *Black Panther*, a young person may well have admired him, understood him deeply, or felt a sense of connection to him—all aspects of identification—without specifically wishing to be more like him. The issue is complex and there is much more to Killmonger than what we highlight in this short examination.

Despite the weaknesses of the study, we have learned much from it. For example, it is worth noting that this group of adolescents highly identified with T'Challa regardless of ethnicity; they also had moderate identification with the antihero Killmonger despite the potential issue with the identification measure. There were hints of differences in other ethnic groups that would be interesting to investigate further; for instance, changes in wellbeing for white participants, which were slightly negative although not significant. Overall, the general trend for youth who watched *Black Panther* to feel an increased sense of empowerment is an important piece of evidence that popular culture does make a difference in the identity formation of youth of color.

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