

Media Matters: A Critical Analysis of *Black Panther*'s Role in the Pursuit of Cultural and Racial Media Representation

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Abstract

This paper uses the 2018 film *Black Panther* as a framework for examining the intrinsic link between mass media representations of racial/ethnic minorities and societal perceptions towards these identity groups.

A sample of 33 Canadians between the ages of 18 and 30 were surveyed to collect various opinions on the representations in *Black Panther*. Results were validated using a content analysis and were then analyzed through the lens of critical race theory, reception theory, and gaze theory. This set the stage for exploring how the representations of Black identity and ‘Africanicity’ in the film contributed to its commercial, critical, and cultural success in North America, as well as the ways in which these representations may have changed the perception of Black identities and Africanicity by Canadian young adults.

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Chapter I: Introduction

What they [the mass media] exercise is the power to represent the world in certain definite ways. And because there are many different and conflicting ways in which the meaning about the world can be constructed, it matters profoundly what and who gets represented, who and what regularly and routinely gets left out; and how things, people, events, relationships are represented. What we know of society depends on how things are represented to us and that knowledge in turn informs what we do and what policies we are prepared to accept. (Miller, 2002, p. 246)

The mass media's ability to influence public perception, opinions, attitudes, and behaviours was first made evident at the turn of the 20th century, when scholars began observing that, in countries where mass media consumption was a part of daily life – mainly Europe and North America – opinions, attitudes, political beliefs, and general habits were affected by the media content that individuals consumed (McQuail, 1977). Since then, companies and institutions have been regularly using mass media as a tool for setting socio-political agendas, imparting targeted messages, and inculcating ideas about specific individuals, groups, or organizations (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). In entertainment media, these ideas are typically disseminated through visual and audible representations, as traditionally stigmatized or unfavoured groups are often underrepresented, misrepresented, or portrayed in light of negative stereotypes.

Since “mass media has incentives to cater most to the dominant and most lucrative group of individuals within a culture,” racial and ethnic minorities (i.e., anyone who is not White/Caucasian) have been one of the main victims of these types of disparaging portrayals in North America (Ferguson, 2015, p. 143). The North American mass media's long-standing representations of blackness as something inherently negative epitomizes this. Media producers have historically portrayed Black bodies through biases and negative stereotypes that promulgate White supremacist ideologies and reinforce the essential ‘Otherness’ and the subjugation of the

Black body (Yousman, 2003; Patton, 2006). In visual media, this is often manifested by categorizing Black and other non-White characters in film and television as uneducated, criminal, uncivilized, or inept (Fanon, 1961). During the Jim Crow era in the United States¹, these ideas were exemplified with various racist caricatures, including the Coon, the Savage, and the Sapphire, as well as ‘comfort’ characters such as Uncle Tom and Mammy (Bogle, 1994). Today, they are mirrored in stereotypical representations of the angry Black man, the sassy Black woman, as well as those representations that, at face value, seem harmless, but are in fact rooted in racist imagery that looks to reinforce the essential Otherness or inferiority of the Black body (think of pop culture figures like Aunt Jemima) (Duru, 2004; Behnken et al., 2015).

The longevity of such portrayals has created a dangerous trend in the way Blacks and other people of colour are perceived by the masses. Since North American society uses the mass media as a tool to build and understand the world around them and feed their construction of the ‘Other,’ millions of North Americans are perceiving race through popular anti-Black representations (Cappello, 2019). They are therefore left with the impression that all Black people adhere to the stereotypes being portrayed, thereby resulting in the further Othering and alienation of this identity group.

To break this cycle, media producers like Spike Lee and Ava Duvernay have made efforts to present multidimensional Black characters who illustrate success and offset the stereotypical representations that otherwise dominate the popular mass media (Kellner, 2020). Films like *Do the*

¹ The Jim Crow era refers to the period between the end of the American Civil War and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which is most notably marked by racial segregation and anti-Black discrimination in voting, education, and the use of public spaces in the United States (Wormser, 2014).

Right Thing (1989), *Selma* (2014), *Chi-Raq* (2015), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) challenge stereotypical representations of blackness on screen in a way that allows audiences to build different and new images of this identity group formation. Each of these films has successfully generated conversations about anti-Black racism in White spaces and encouraged the creation of more media content that gives attractive and captivating depictions of blackness. On the list of contemporary media products to have taken this direction, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) stands out as perhaps one of, if not *the* most popular movies of the 2010s to obtain critical, cultural, and commercial success while simultaneously breaking negative naturalized racial representations about Black identity, history, and cultures.

Black Panther was deemed “the first ‘black blockbuster’” by film critics because of the way it featured “a black superhero, black director and mostly black cast.” (Tompkins, 2018). The movie combines education and entertainment as the audience follows King T’Challa (Chadwick Boseman) – leader and defender of the fictional African country of Wakanda, a nation free from colonization – as he is faced with treachery and conflict when a challenge from a powerful enemy puts the fate of the country at risk. T’Challa must assemble his allies to combat this threat and secure the future of Wakanda, his people, and their way of life, all while maintaining the country’s low-key and independent status on the international stage.

The film was praised for several reasons, including its avant-garde representations of blackness, African history and cultures, and anti-colonial discourse, as well as for its characters that pushed boundaries and challenged common racial and gender-based stereotypes. Further, it was celebrated for being the first big-budget fiction-based movie to represent blackness as a symbol of strength, supra-intelligence, empowerment, and accomplishment, rather than as a social

handicap (Eckhardt, 2018; Omanga & Mainye, 2019). In doing so, it gave audiences across the world an image of blackness that had never before been seen on-screen in a non-comedic context and helped showcase “the verifiable positive effects of quality minority representation” (Smith, 2018; D’Agostino, 2019, p. 1).

Given the immense popularity of the film and the acclaim it received for its transformative articulations, the representations of blackness and Africanicity (e.g., African identity) in *Black Panther* will be the object of this research. By using a survey and a qualitative content analysis, this essay will explore how Canadian young adults perceived the representations of blackness in *Black Panther* and the role these images played in the film’s success. The analysis is supported by three theories that are central to Cultural Studies. Critical race theory, gaze theory and reception theory provide a unique point of view on the issue and, in concert, provide a clear illustration of the implications of minority representation in current North American mass media. That being said, these theories frame two central research questions:

- (1) How did the positive representations of blackness in the 2018 film *Black Panther* contribute to the film’s critical, cultural, and commercial success in North America?
- (2) What impact have these representations had on the way Black identity and ‘Africanicity’ are perceived by Canadian young adults?

To conduct this study, several concepts pertaining to mass communication, media representation, and audience reception are manifested and explored. Chapter II outlines a comprehensive literature review to frame the theoretical and socio-historical context of this study.

Specifically, it examines the various facets of the issue, highlighting several perspectives and identifying gaps in existing literature. This chapter also provides background on critical race theory, gaze theory, and reception theory, explaining how each theory applies to the case of *Black Panther* and how they were used to apprise the research questions.

Chapter III describes the mixed qualitative and quantitative research methodology that was mobilized to conduct this analysis. It details the implications of the anonymous survey used to gauge the opinions of Canadian youth (aged 18 to 30) on their general impressions of *Black Panther* and its representations, as well as the systematic content analysis used to identify themes and patterns in the film's representations. In addition, this chapter offers a detailed rationale for the sampling methodology, clarifying (i) inclusion factors for survey respondents; (ii) the approach used to conduct the content analysis; and (iii) elaboration of the survey.

Results, analyses, and discussion are presented in Chapter IV, where survey and content analysis findings are summarized and interpreted in consideration of the research questions and theoretical framework. This makes way for an evaluation of the relevance of the hypotheses and of the methodological approach, while further enabling a discussion on the prevalence of social identities in the reception of media representations.

The research paper concludes with Chapter V, where the main findings and implications are summarized, limitations of the study are discussed, and the contributions of this research to representation studies are further considered.

Chapter II: Problematization

Literature review

The imminence of the mass media's influence over individual and societal perception has been a topic of debate among media scholars for decades (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Power et al., 2002). Until recently, scholars have been categorizing audiences as either active or passive based on their level of involvement in the consumption and interpretation of mass media products. Proponents of the passive audience perspective believe that the media individuals consume has a direct influence on their behaviour and attitudes. Under this umbrella falls an array of media effects theories such as the hypodermic needle model, agenda-setting theory, and cultivation theory, each assuming that the media is a powerful tool with the ability to shape both internal and external perceptions (Borah, 2016). In contrast, proponents of the active audience approach posit that individuals are capable of selecting and attending to messages before "interpreting [them] according to subjective views developed within certain social contexts" (Cappello, 2019, p. 168). Supporters of this theory also suggest that media content is consumed to fulfill needs and to construct and understand the world around us, as is advanced by the uses and gratifications model, reception theory, and, to a certain extent, the two-step flow model (Kim & Rubin, 1997).

Although these two perspectives have been central to advancing knowledge in critical media studies for over 70 years, the dichotomy has recently been challenged, as several scholars have fought to include the notion of an affective audience in this discussion (Power et al., 2002). Certain authors argue that audience involvement partially depends on "affectively oriented action" meaning that audience activity is determined based on "the degree to which audience members identify with characters or with other salient characteristics of a media program" (Sood, 2002, p.

158). While some may maintain that this is very similar to the active audience perspective, since the audience member engages in constructions of the self and of the Other, advocates of this burgeoning theory believe otherwise. Shanti Kumar (2019) emphasizes that the affective audience perspective is reliant on “multisensory experiences of affect in *non-representational* terms,” therefore differentiating it from the active audience approach, which is representation-dependent (p. 100). According to this view, the passive versus active audience debate is outdated, as it does not account for “the globalization of media industries, the proliferation of transnational and domestic channels, hybridization of programming, and the diversification of viewer/consumer experiences and expectations.” Each of these elements “have fundamentally altered the relationship between television and its audiences,” thereby placing the affective audience approach as one step removed from the active audience perspective (Kumar, 2019, pp. 104-106).

When examining mass media representations, most scholars defer to the active audience perspective because of the way it helps explain the dynamic construction of the consumer’s identity (Barker, 1999). However, the true breadth of this perspective is seldom discussed. Frank Biocca (1988) proposes five areas of audience activity: selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality, involvement, and imperviousness to influence. Gunter (1988) explains that these categories represent the diversity of thought within the active audience approach. “They serve to illustrate the variety of ways in which different researchers have investigated how audiences can be active as they approach media,” and therefore provide a better understanding of what can be considered audience activity (p. 109). First, audience activity as selectivity is “grounded in the theories of selective attention, perception, and retention” and involves making decisions about media consumption (Biocca, 1988, p. 53); for example, choosing to watch television over reading a book (Gunter, 1988). Audience activity as utilitarianism is considered an extension of selectivity. It is

best exemplified by the uses and gratifications model. According to this stream, “not only are individuals selective in their use of media, but also that media content is selectively chosen for the purpose of satisfying particular needs and motives” (Gunter, 1988, p. 111). Third, audience activity as intentionality adopts a more cognitive approach, as it “points to schematic processing and structuring of incoming information,” meaning that the consumption of the media content is deliberate and purpose-driven, often to generate and/or to store knowledge (Biocca, 1988, p. 53). Next, audience activity as involvement refers to the cognitive or emotional investment in the content being consumed. For example, following a storyline or ‘talking back’ to the television (Biocca, 1988; Gunter, 1988). Lastly, the idea of audience activity as imperviousness to influence draws on phenomena like failed advertising campaigns to illustrate how audiences are capable of actively limiting the influence the mass media has on them (Biocca, 1988).

Each of these ‘types’ of audience activity correspond with Stuart Hall’s (1973) encoding/decoding model, as they illustrate how the interpretation of a media product is dependent on an array of internal and external factors. This makes the active audience approach appropriate for examining psycho-social responses to media products; however, its implications remain complex, since the definition of “activity” is subject to various interpretations. Biocca (1988) explains that “by attempting to cover everything the audience member does, it ends up specifying little and excluding nothing. Every twitch, every thought, every choice – both mindful and mindless – is recorded as evidence of ‘activity’” (p. 75). In other words, any movement, comment, or expression could be construed as “activity” in response to the media product; when, in reality, these actions could be in response to other internal or external factors.

Given the debate in the literature and this study's position at the intersection of affective evocation and the subjective interpretation of media representation, it is difficult to place this research topic among a single audience theory. This essay will therefore draw on all three theories of audience activity to answer the posed research questions. The active audience perspective provides a fitting framework whereby it presupposes that when an audience member consumes media, the individual uses social context and personal experiences to decode encoded messages. The affective audience theory's focus on agency and the diversification of consumer experiences and expectations also plays a key role in determining how representations in *Black Panther* may have shaped societal perceptions of blackness and of Africanity. The passive audience perspective is also considered as this study looks at the media's ability to shape perceptions and opinions. That said, this research pulls elements from several schools of thought, and therefore cannot subscribe to a single perspective, but will rather use components from each of the presented theories to situate itself in the current literature on mass media representation.

Audience activity is often discussed in conjunction with representation studies, since an individual's level of engagement in a media product is partially dependent on their ability to understand and/or identify with the content being consumed (Hall, 1973). Together, they constitute an integral component of the interdisciplinary school of Cultural Studies, as they work jointly to shed light on the reception of specific articulations in the mass media. Lata Mani (1990) describes 'Cultural Studies' as "a location where the new politics of difference – racial, sexual, cultural, transnational – can combine and be articulated in all their dazzling plurality" (p. 392). The mass media's representations of the Other is a point on which these articulations converge. 'Othering' as a result of negative media representations became a topic of interest among cultural theorists after the publication of Edward Saïd's (1978) *Orientalism*. Saïd's work emphasized "the historical

contingencies of problematic western ‘Othering’,” which caused “representations of Others (ethnic, racial, gender or sexual minorities, international Others) [to] become a focal point for critical cultural media studies” (Fürsich, 2010, p. 116). As a result, media scholars began to “use media texts such as newspaper articles, television programmes or advertisements to show evidence of this Othering,” and to develop further research on the effects of mass media representations (Fürsich, 2010, p. 116). Scholars soon found that racial and ethnic minorities were targeted by the mass media by way of misrepresentation and under-representation, which further contributed to the ‘Othering’ described by Saïd. This was especially prevalent in predominantly White countries and was found to have had a severe impact on the way these identity groups were perceived by the masses.²

Most cultural theorists agree that these misrepresentations and under-representations work to perpetuate a cycle of stereotypes and oppression that feed systematic and institutionalized racism. This is mainly because the media plays an important role in “upholding problematic stereotypes” that work “to support dominant groups retain power and resources” (Fürsich, 2010, p. 116; Merskin, 2017, p. 54). In fact,

Cultural media scholarship has often demonstrated that news and entertainment media stereotype non-white, non-elite groups and other minorities by excluding

² Hartmann and Husband (1974) and Hartmann et al. (1974), [...] investigated the ethnic news coverage in Britain during the 1960s and found that the emerging news framework encouraged the perspective of ‘people of color’ as problems, aberrations, or just oddities. Hall (1992a; 1992b) found similar results, as blacks in the UK were symbolized as less civilized and culturally inferior due to differences in their race and color as compared to the majority. Besides the UK, scholars investigating race relations in the USA in the 1980s also found [...] [that] media discourses were frequent in associating minorities with drug involvements and depicting them as problematic to society (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1985). Media portrayals of African-Americans were found to align with majority white preconceptions of blacks being thieves, troublemakers, violent, and drug pushers (Oliver, 1994; Staples, 2011). Scholars in other parts of the world found similar representation of other minorities (Kabir, 2010). (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017, p. 221)

them from coverage or by offering a limited range of representations. Media imagery across various platforms, from news journalism to fictional movies, has often portrayed minorities as different, exotic, special, essentialized or even abnormal. It is especially striking that the repertoire of representations of diverse minorities that contemporary media offer is often linked to historically established racist imaginaries such as in colonial literature and science (for example, slave imaginary or Orientalism) (Fürsich, 2010, p. 116).

The consensus among media scholars about the intricacies of racial and ethnic minority representation in North American media is underscored by a divide on the definition of ‘representation’. The father of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall (1990), suggested that media representations are signifying practices rather than reflections or distortions of reality. He argues that mass media are creators and distributors of ideologies – fuelled by signification, language, and culture – and therefore play an active role in shaping perceptions (Zhang, 2017). In a lecture given on representation and the mass media, Hall (2002) explains that representation “is part of the object itself; it is constitutive of it. It is one of its conditions of existence, and therefore representation is not outside the event, not after the event, but within the event itself”. Although this view is somewhat abstract, it has served as a foundation for several other definitions of ‘representation’. For instance, Shani Orgad (2014) defines media representations as “the images, stories, accounts and voices that we encounter daily on television and the Internet, and in advertisements and newspapers” that “function as a kind of background to our social lives, but [...] shape our individual and collective imaginations in consequential ways” (p. 34). Similarly, Brooks and Hébert (2006) state that representations are “how individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, Black, White, Asian, Latino, Native American—even rural or urban” (p. 297). More recently, Ahmed and Matthes (2017), who examined the media representations of Muslims and Islam in North American media over the course of 15 years (2000 to 2015), defined representation as a tool for reinforcing antagonistic

social discourses and as a way for media producers to influence public beliefs about specific identity groups. In each case, scholars agree that media representations shape our perceptions of ourselves, of the world, and of the Other, but are largely dependent on subjective interpretation. As such, while it is difficult to characterize a representation as positive or negative, most theorists support the need for accurate representations of historically marginalized groups.

The importance of positive and accurate media representations is accentuated by the adverse effects of negative representations. Negative representations and under-representations have been shown to have a critical impact on racial identity, especially among youth of colour. This population is particularly vulnerable to the effects of misrepresentation and under-representation because racial identity is developed at a young age and is informed by our socio-cultural environment, including the communication products with which we are surrounded and consume. As such, youth who observe the racial identity group(s) with which they identify frequently being misrepresented or under-represented are likely to develop an unstable sense of their own racial identity and carry this uncertainty through adulthood (Broman et al., 1989).

This issue is made even more complex when the history of racial identity and its impact on societal perceptions are taken into consideration. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) define racial identity as “a multidimensional psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic–racial group memberships, as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time” (p. 23). Though it has now become an indicator of group membership, culture, and history, the notion of racial identity “arose out of the context of African slavery,” as it was used as a marker of social status upon the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the Americas (Smedley, 1997). Fed by the belief that “the lighter one's skin color [*sic.*],

the better one is,” early colonial settlers used racial identification to justify the commandeering and enslavement of those who were perceived to be inferior to them (i.e., non-Whites) (Patton, 2006, p. 38; Smedley, 1997). The idea of race therefore originated as “a set of culturally created attitudes and beliefs about human group differences” that were externally imposed by the dominant cultural group (Smedley, 1997). Today, this is preserved in mass media representations that use stereotypical and racist depictions to communicate the essential otherness of BIPOC³. Such representations are inherently detrimental to the development of a positive racial identity, since they can lead to the formation of a negative self-concept, poor self-esteem, and other conflicts with identity perception (González-Velázquez et al., 2020; Merskin, 2017; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Trebbe et al., 2017). The dissemination of positive and accurate media representations is therefore decisive in helping individuals explore their racial identities, as the notion of racial identity continues to evolve into a complex qualifier that allows people of various backgrounds to establish connections with others who perceive themselves in a similar manner (Sue & Sue, 2008). Scholars have explained that the proliferation of media both by and for racial and ethnic minorities is necessary in predominantly White societies as it acts as a “tool for promotion of the minority’s political, social and cultural interests” while simultaneously challenging stereotypical representations and allowing members of the represented groups to develop positive racial identities (Caspi & Elias, 2011, p. 63; Browne, 2005; Meiss & Tait, 2005). To this effect, the representations of blackness and of Africanicity in *Black Panther* may therefore lead to a more stable sense of self among Black audience members and may help foster connections between audience members who perceive themselves to be part of the same racial identity group.

³ An acronym standing for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.

Though racial and ethnic identification plays an important role in the decoding of mediated racial representations, the development of a racial identity is multifaceted and, for many, a personal journey. This being said, in the context of this research, Black people encompass members of the African diaspora – including Afro-Caribbean and people of mixed race. The inclusion of mixed-race individuals stems from the fact that those with only one Black parent often perceive themselves as part of the Black identity group and are typically considered to be Black, rather than mixed-race, by the dominant cultural group (Campion, 2019). They therefore face many of the same challenges as those with two Black parents, both on the individual and societal levels.

Based on this definition, the implications of mediated representations of blackness are complex since they are often subject to significant colourism. Colourism can be defined as the preferential treatment of lighter-skinned people within a racial/ethnic minority group that stems from the colour caste system that originated with early colonial settlers (Hall, 1995). In visual media, colourism manifests itself in “the casting of lighter skinned actors into key roles in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience” (Foster et al., 2021). Historically, Black actors with light skin and Eurocentric or “ethnically ambiguous” features have been chosen to portray successful, intelligent, and desirable characters, while those with darker skin tones typically portray angry, troubled, and/or dishevelled personas (Hall, 2018; Milkie, 1999; Kilbourne, 1999). This association of lighter skin with attractiveness and likeability is instilled from a young age and exists in all media types:

An analysis of the popular children's animated series *Proud Family* demonstrates that even in a context where a 'traditional' African American family and positive community relations are shown, colorism is still prominent. Rather than being critiqued or challenged, kids' media is used to reinforce colorist ideals within the African American community. Attributes of wealth, beauty, and intelligence are applied to characters with Eurocentric phenotypic characteristics while deviance, stupidity, poverty and unattractiveness typify characters with more Afrocentric facial features" (Steele, 2016, p. 53).

Colourism is also used in the media to reinforce existing stereotypes and impart ideas of Black depravity. For instance, the infamous O.J. Simpson *Time* magazine cover that "depicted Simpson in a darkened mugshot unshaved dreary eyed" looked to associate dark skin with stereotypes of Black barbarity and to paint him as a "super-criminal" (Hawkins, 1998, p. 42). This persistent association of dark skin with undesirable characteristics and evilness has led to widespread practices of skin bleaching and skin lightening among Black men and women alike in Africa and in the diaspora, thereby illustrating the true extent of the influence mass media representations can have (Tate, 2017; Nyoni-Kachambwa et al., 2021; Gabriel, 2017).

As discussions about the problematic nature of such representations begin to take up more space in pop culture realms, a greater consideration is being attributed to changing the way marginalized groups are presented in mass media. Elfriede Fürsich (2010) explains that a change must occur within "the three main domains of mediated communication: production, content and audiences," but that the broader economic, social, and geopolitical contexts must also be considered (p. 119). In recent years, several media companies have examined how they can put forth diverse representations to combat the hundreds of years of systematic oppression and racist representations that have flooded media outlets. As part of these efforts, an acute focus has been put on White Hollywood's misrepresentation and under-representation of Black bodies that have

encouraged the continued oppression and alienation of this identity group (Tompkins, 2018; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Existing representations have made way for differential treatment and social othering, as they have been found to “shape intergroup interactions by influencing how out-group members view and interact with [the Other]” (Besana, 2019, p. 201; Ward, 2004; Milkie, 1999). On the societal level, misrepresentations of Black individuals in the media have been linked to the creation and sustainment of socio-political systems, structures, and ideologies founded on historical discrimination and stereotypes (Banaji 2017; Callanan, 2012; Alsultany, 2012). This reinforces the already-prevalent institutionalized racism present in predominantly White societies and causes Black people to be perceived unfavourably by the masses. This perception – being the prevailing view – is typically reflected in mass media products that aim to cater to the dominant group. However, the influence is bi-directional, as these mass media representations are fuelled by anti-Black racism, and the consumptions of these representations by the masses in turn fuel racist drivel. The idea of blackness as something inherently negative and/or inferior is therefore maintained, causing the cycle of misrepresentation and under-representation to continue *ad infinitum* (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003; Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Shah, 2014). The positive and accurate mediated representation of racial and ethnic minorities is therefore necessary not only to favour cultural awareness and cultural diversity, but also to foster a more inclusive society overall, in addition to contributing to the improvement of mental health and self-concept in racialized individuals (Magder, 2004; Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998; Zayani, 2011).

Given the long-standing history of adverse representations of blackness in the North American mass media, *Black Panther* symbolizes a socio-cultural emblem of empowerment that dismantles the conventional representation of blackness as innately negative, and of Africa as a poor, dirty, and technologically deprived continent. By frequently and consistently challenging

stereotypical representations of Black identity and of Africanicity, the film represents “the momentous meltdown of the glacier of black under-/mis-representation, and a turning point in black cosmopolitanism and new imaginaries of African identities” (Omanga & Mainye, 2019, p. 20; Firmansyah & Jones, 2019; Harris et al., 2017). In doing so, it advances a complex rhetoric that enriches the conversation on mass media representation and serves as a stepping-stone for further social education on the matter.

Theoretical Framework

This discourse on the importance of positive and accurate representations of Black bodies in the media is endorsed by a triangulated theoretical framework based in Critical-Cultural Studies. Using critical race theory, gaze theory and reception theory to frame this research, we gain a thorough understanding of the consequences of mass media representations. This framework also provides insight into why certain media representations are received and perceived by the masses in specific ways.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s critical race theory (CRT) (1995) is used in this analysis to examine *Black Panther*’s articulation of race and racial identity, as well as its objection to traditional biased representations of blackness and of Africanicity. CRT’s emphasis on the relationship between race, racism, and power, its criticism of racism and racial stereotypes, and its focus on “representations that break conventional limited and biased representations” make it a fitting framework for this analysis (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Kellner, 2020, p. 22). The theory will help illustrate the ways in which *Black Panther* contributed to breaking the cycle of racist, pseudo-racist, and racist-sexist representations of Black men and women in North American media. In addition, CRT’s focus on

intersectionality will also be relevant in this analysis, since *Black Panther* has unremittingly been praised for its “portraits of smart, powerful, passionate women” who are not defined by their race, but rather break stereotypical representations of Black women as aggressive and over-sexualized (Williams, 2018, p. 27).

The second component of this theoretical framework – gaze theory – will be used in this analysis to examine the lens through which blackness is typically portrayed in mass media and how *Black Panther* challenges this perception. The gaze “signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Schroeder, 1998, p. 208). The notion can be conceptualized both literally and figuratively – on one hand referring to actual looking, and from a metaphorical perspective, referring to “a way of thinking about, and acting in, the world” (Devereaux, 1990, p. 337). Michel Foucault (1975) explains that the gaze may be used as a tool to articulate a domination-oppression relationship. This idea of gazing to express the dynamics of social and political power relations has been readopted and applied in various contexts; most famously by Laura Mulvey (1975), who coined the term “male gaze” to define the heterosexual masculine lens through which White women are depicted and viewed in society. Although the male gaze arguably remains the most popular adaptation of this theory, this research focuses on racial gazes, such as E. Ann Kaplan’s imperial gaze (1997) and Frantz Fanon’s White/colonial gaze (1971), both which describe the lens through which BIPOC are viewed as the essential Other in a White hegemonic society. Such racial gazes are the by-product of the White supremacist structures upon which North America is built (Yancy, 2008); yet films like *Black Panther* seek to challenge these oppressive and alienating gazes by invoking an oppositional gaze and by producing a “new” representation of blackness based in cultural and racial pride and celebration. bell hooks [sic.] (2003), defines the oppositional gaze as a “hard intense direct look”

that is “seen as confrontational” and acts as a “[gesture] of resistance, [and] [challenge] to authority” (p. 94). Gaze theory will therefore be used in this analysis to unveil how *Black Panther* mobilizes oppositional gazes through its representations of blackness. Moreover, this theory will help contextualize many of the positive representations observed in the film and provide context for the naturalized negative White hegemonic gazes on Black characters.

The theoretical framework is complete with Stuart Hall’s reception theory (1973), as it will be used to explore how *Black Panther* was received by audiences who belong to different demographic groups. The theory presupposes that the reception of a same media product can differ between audience members, who can adopt one of three positions when decoding a message: (i) a dominant reading, (ii) an oppositional reading; or (iii) a negotiated reading. A dominant reading occurs when audience members view the cultural product the way the producer intended it to be viewed, and agree with the messages conveyed; typically, because they understand it and/or can identify with it. An oppositional reading takes place when the audience rejects the producer’s messages and attributes their own meaning to the media product. This occurs when the audience disagrees with or does not understand the producer’s take. Lastly, the negotiated reading sits between the two former positions, as members of the audience accept parts of the producer's views, but also builds their own meaning (Hall, 1973). In using reception theory in the analysis, we will be presented with the reasons why certain demographic groups perceived the representations in the film in certain ways and how various layers of their social identities contributed to their interpretation of the portrayed representations.

CRT and gaze theory are both products of critical theory – a school of thought based in social philosophy that focuses on reflexivity and critiquing society and dominant culture. It

therefore spotlights key issues that feed negative media representations, such as hegemonic power structures, racism, oppression, intersectionality, privilege, and identity (Devetak, 2005). When used concurrently with reception theory, CRT and gaze theory provide insight into the reasons behind the popularity and the interpretations of popular media representations. Applying these three theories to *Black Panther*, provides us with a thorough understanding of why the film's representations are so monumental and how they work to challenge the prevailing depictions of blackness and of Africanity in popular North American media.

The existing research on audience activity, racial identity, and the effects of media representation demonstrates why *Black Panther's* portrayals of blackness and of Africanity constitute a cultural juncture and how they may have acted as a catalyst for further discussions on the issue at hand. This literature also aids in contextualizing the ways in which theoretical concepts and ideologies may be applicable to the research object, thereby providing insight necessary to answering the research questions.

Black Panther's impact on both individual and societal perceptions of blackness and of Africanity is significant, as the film seems to have sparked interest in furthering conversations on the issue of White, Eurocentric hegemony (Eckhardt, 2018). As such, I hypothesize that the positive representations of blackness in *Black Panther* contributed to the movie's commercial, critical, and cultural success by presenting audiences with new images that they could understand and with which they could identify. Furthermore, I believe that the film's anti-colonialism and Black independence messaging, as well as its ability to educate audiences on African history and cultures, had a positive impact on the way Black identity is perceived by Canadian young adults.

After examining literature on the topic, it becomes clear that this research will contribute to advancing knowledge in Cultural Studies – specifically in the field of media representation of racial identities – by providing a comprehensive overview of the representations in *Black Panther* from the perspective of a racially diverse group of Canadian young adults. In addition, the findings from this research will be constructive for society as a whole by contributing to the discussion on representation and by encouraging the continued positive representations of traditionally misrepresented and under-represented groups in contemporary mass media.

Chapter III: Methodology⁴

Given this study's focus on the interpretation of mass media representations, it was necessary to mobilize a methodological approach that was capable of apprehending the perceptions of the target audience, while also capturing any nuances relevant to the theoretical framework. Surveys and qualitative content analysis were therefore selected for this study because of their ability to produce data that will help provide well-rounded and congruent answers to the research questions in a way that favours maximal research validity.

Surveys were chosen as the primary data collection tool because of their ability to capture large amounts of data, while also providing respondent anonymity. According to a 2000 study, the guarantee of anonymity encourages respondents to be honest when answering questions about their beliefs or other questions of a sensitive nature (Ong & Weiss, 2000). Furthermore, anonymity has been found to limit the spiral of silence, since individuals may feel more comfortable sharing their opinions when they know they cannot be identified and judged by others (Eisenkraft & Elfenbein, 2010). Although such a study could perhaps be carried out using qualitative interviews or focus groups, the required presence of the researcher during these sessions poses a threat to the research validity, as respondents are less likely to be open and honest if they are aware of the possibility of judgement from peers or the researcher (Bonneville et al., 2007). Surveys are therefore favoured not only because of their ability to apprehend a larger sample, but also because they encourage honesty by eliminating this perceived judgement.

⁴ This methodology was approved by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity of the University of Ottawa (see Appendix 4).

On the practical side, surveys were selected over alternative methods because of the short time frame provided to complete this research. While interviews and focus groups allow for more depth, they are time-consuming and, as such, the number of interviews that can be conducted would be limited. Surveys, on the other hand, permit the almost-instantaneous collection of information within a large sample, thereby allowing for more data and a wider variety of viewpoints.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as a supporting method because of the way it facilitates the interpretation of survey results. By providing context for the representations described by survey respondents, content analysis can help clarify certain survey answers and help elucidate correspondences between the film's representations, the theoretical framework, and peripheral avenues in Cultural Studies.

The survey (found in Appendix 3) was developed for an audience of North Americans between the ages of 18 and 30 who have seen *Black Panther* and who have a general knowledge of current popular culture. This population was chosen based on the fact that, upon its release, *Black Panther* was particularly popular with youth aged 30 and below (Cheung, 2018), most likely because the film's marketing was largely deployed over social media, and a large portion of the Canadian population below the age of 30 are frequent social media users. Statistics Canada (2021) found that 96% of Canadian youth aged 15 to 24, and 87% of those aged 25 to 34 use social media frequently. It is therefore likely that the online marketing for *Black Panther* reached the targeted audience who, in turn, would have been enticed to see the film. Although the movie's target audience also included children and teenagers (particularly because it is a superhero movie), the focus for this research is on those between 18 and 30 years of age because these individuals are

more likely to have a better understanding of the intricacies of the historical, racial, and cultural representations in the film and be more aware about their changing perceptions.

The survey sample was chosen using non-probabilistic network and quota sampling. The electronic survey was shared via social media and text message with individuals within the researcher's personal network who meet the age and residence requirement and who have watched *Black Panther* in its entirety – at least once – since its release in January 2018. Upon completion, respondents were asked to share the survey with people they know who meet the inclusion criteria in order to help diversify the sample pool. Using a combined network and quota sampling approach further promoted heterogeneity, as well as fortified research validity, as this method ensures that the survey is only answered by people who meet the inclusion criteria, but is not uniquely answered by those confined to the researcher's personal network.

The survey itself consisted of 34 questions, combining multiple choice, Likert scale and open-ended formats. Questions sought to capture demographic information, opinions about what constitutes positive and negative representations, perceptions of 'the kind' of representations in the movie, and how these representations may be compared to those in current popular media. The combination of pre-established answer options and open-ended questions helped ensure that respondents were in line with the research subject, while still providing them with the opportunity to elaborate on their answers. Moreover, it allowed for qualitative data to be seized in a quantitative format, thus highlighting tendencies among certain subgroups (e.g., age groups, racial identity groups, gender identity groups, etc.), while considering pattern analyses.

Once data collection from the survey was complete, a qualitative content analysis of *Black Panther* was conducted to corroborate the themes and ideas expressed by survey respondents. The analysis used an open approach, as thematic representations (e.g., Black/African identity), as well as visual and audible representations (e.g., hairstyles for natural Black hair, accents, etc.) were examined in consideration of survey responses and to pull examples that illustrate the types of representations described. The content analysis therefore helped deduce the ways in which these representations were understood and what they signified for the surveyed population.

Adopting a dual-research design helped unveil nuances in the representations, develop clear answers to the posed research questions, and collect ancillary data that may be used to develop future studies. Nevertheless, the selected methods pose limitations that may restrict the scope of the research. Most notably, the use of an anonymous survey removes the possibility of in-depth exploration of the answers provided and the ability to verify whether survey respondents are being truthful, which could result in inadvertent misrepresentations in tendencies. Although anonymity may impact the amount of detail available for analysis, this was factored in during the development of the survey. By asking respondents to provide short explanations for their answers, the survey was able to record as much detail as possible without needing to identify or contact respondents later for a more in-depth exploration of their feedback.

It is also necessary to note that the network sampling approach used may have constrained the study by generating a sample of like-minded individuals. Though this is not a problem in and of itself, it may have limited the diversity of thought in the survey responses, thus making it more difficult to extrapolate findings.

Regarding the content analysis, there are limits in its inherent subjectivity. This method relies on decoding encoded messages and attributing meaning to these messages using contextual observation and referential baggage. Its dependence on individual interpretation may therefore render the findings from this analysis difficult to replicate. For this reason, the content analysis is not being used as the main data collection method, but rather as a supporting method to extract further meaning from survey findings.

Despite these limitations, this mixed methodological approach provided empirical data about the target population's opinions on the representations in *Black Panther* and allowed these opinions to be examined through a critical-cultural lens. It divulged the popularity of the film among Canadian young adults and was ultimately conducive to providing comprehensive answers to the central research questions.

Chapter IV: Results, Analysis, and Discussion

The survey yielded 33 unique perspectives on (i) the depictions of various characters in *Black Panther*; (ii) the film's impact on popular culture; and (iii) the significance of its representations. Themes expressed in the survey were validated by concrete examples from the movie that were identified in the content analysis. Using these methods conjointly, we painted a complete portrait of the film's representations, which helped reveal the applicability of the hypotheses and explore the research questions from multiple perspectives.

The sample population for the survey consisted of 20 women, 10 men, one gender-fluid person and two people who did not disclose their gender identity. Each respondent confirmed being a Canadian resident and 97% of respondents considered themselves to be familiar with current North American popular culture, rating their knowledge on the subject either a four or a five on a scale of one to five. At the time of completion, 72.7% of respondents were between the ages of 21 and 24; 12.1% were between 18 and 20 years old; and 12.1% fell in the age range of 25-30; 3.1% of respondents chose not to disclose their age.

Given this study's focus on racial identity and minority representation, an ethnically diverse sample pool was necessary to collect heterogeneous and intersectional points of view on the matter. As illustrated in Table 1, respondents hailed from an array of racial/ethnic groups, with several individuals identifying with more than one racial identity group. These racial/ethnic categories are based on those recognized by the Government of Canada as being descriptive of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2015).

Table 1: Racial/Ethnic Makeup of the Sample

Racial/Ethnic Group	Number of Respondents Identifying With This Racial/Ethnic Group
White/Caucasian	6
Black	11
Asian	4
South Asian	1
Arab	3
Latin American	1
Biracial - White and Black	2
Biracial - White and Indigenous (Métis)	3
Biracial - Asian and South Asian	1
Undisclosed multi-racial	1

All respondents agreed that the representations in *Black Panther* were positive to a certain degree. When asked to rate representations on a scale of all positive to all negative, based on their own definitions of what constitutes positive and negative representations, 42.4% of respondents said the representations in the film were all positive; 51.5% said they were mostly positive; and 6.1% said there were some positive and some negative representations. With this came a multitude of supporting adjectives to describe the film’s overall representations. When asked to describe *Black Panther* in one word, nearly 27% of survey respondents called the film “powerful”. Other peripheral terms used by more than one respondent include “empowering,” “diverse,” and “proud”; no negative qualifiers were used.

The five main themes mobilized throughout *Black Panther* were (i) African culture and history, (ii) women's role in society, (iii) the Black and African identities, (iv) challenging Western power structures; and (v) anti-oppression/anti-colonialism. Survey responses highlighted the overlap in these themes, while the qualitative content analysis illustrated how they played into one another throughout the film. Ultimately, the combined results of the survey and the content analysis revealed that these five themes were reflected in characters, dialogue, costumes, and décor, and categorically informed the reception of these representations by the sample population.

Visual Representations

The most prominent representations of Black identity and of Africanicity were upheld through visual aspects in the film, such as costume design, hair, and makeup. It is evident from the start of the movie that these visual effects were inspired by an array of African traditions. Appendix 1 shows eight instances where various characters can be seen wearing costumes, makeup, accessories, and body art that were inspired from African history and various African cultures.

Figure 1 presents T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) wearing a formal *dashiki*-inspired suit as well as the Black Panther suit. The use of *dashikis* for T'Challa's costume inspiration speaks to the way Ruth E. Carter – the film's costume designer – worked to incorporate African elements in ways that would allow for positive on-screen representation. For the Black Panther suit, Carter ensured that it adorned an Okavango pattern, explaining that this pattern is tied back to “the Sacred Geometry of ancient Africa”. She clarified that she wanted to incorporate this pattern in the Black

Panther suit because it “is used in so much art throughout the continent” and would allow for this important part of African history and culture to be associated with strength, resilience, and empowerment (Di Placido, 2018).

In Figure 2, Okoye (Danai Gurira) and the Dora Milaje can be seen dressed in their traditional Wakandan battle gear. The hair, makeup and costume design for the Dora Milaje are said to be inspired by the real-life Dahomey Amazons, an all-female military group from the Kingdom of Dahomey – now known as the Republic of Benin – that existed between the 17th and 19th centuries (Coleman, 2018). The Dora Milaje costumes include intricate beadwork that is representative of various African tribes, tabards with African symbolism and patterns, and Ndebele Neck Rings – an accessory indigenous to the South Ndebele tribes of Zimbabwe and South Africa, that are meant to symbolize wealth and status (Di Placido, 2018; Van Vuuren, 2012). Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the Dora Milaje is their shaved and tattooed heads, which proved to be compelling for many audience members, especially Black women. Popular media often presents Black women with long, straight hair to better appeal to Eurocentric femininity and beauty standards. When they are portrayed with shaved heads in film and television, it is typically used to symbolize a low point in the character’s life, therefore giving shaved heads on Black women a negative connotation (Patton, 2006). Given this tendency and the significance of hair in the Black community, the conscious decision to present the Dora Milaje as strong women with shaved heads constitutes a positive representation that serves to directly challenge hegemonic norms and standards.

Figure 3 shows Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) wearing Xhosa-inspired tribal face paint, a practice often associated with religion and tradition in South Africa (Dold & Cocks, 2005). On the right, the River Tribe Elder (Isaach de Bankolé) is seen sporting ceremonial lip and ear plates, a practice “deeply embedded in [the] mythology, religion, and cosmology” of the Ethiopian Mursi tribe (Fayers-Kerr, 2012, p. 255). These representations allow for cultural elements that are seldom seen in the mass media to be showcased on the world stage in a somewhat ‘organic’ context, rather than against an Othering and observational backdrop.

Figure 4 presents Shuri (Letitia Wright), on the left, wearing bright beading in varied colours that is traditionally worn by women of various African tribes, a spear corset inspired by the Dinka tribe of South Sudan, as well as a distinct animal jaw headdress famously worn by tribe members across the continent (Labelle, 2005; Bloch & Richins, 1992). On the right, we see Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett) wearing a Zulu hat (*isicholo*) – a headdress traditionally worn by married Zulu women in South Africa during religious or cultural ceremonies (Micots, 2008). Again, these representations create a space for various African cultural elements to be displayed on the world stage in a way that is non-essentializing, yet considerate of their cultural and historical meaning.

This is also echoed in Figure 5, where we see the Mining Tribe Elder (Connie Chiume) wearing a clay hairstyle most famously worn by the Himba women of Namibia (Barnett 2020), as well as some traditional beading on her head and around her neck. On the right, we see an unnamed mining tribe member wearing traditional African beading around his arms and wrists as well as a

feathery headdress inspired by that of the Maasai people of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania (Galaty, 1998).

Figure 6 shows Zuri (Forest Whitaker), Wakanda's spiritual leader, wearing an ornamental robe adorned with traditional beading, inspired by the *agbada* worn in West Africa during ceremonial occasions (Ogazie & Odetade, 2020). Zuri's face is also painted with black stripes and yellow dots to mimic the face-painting practices of the Xhosa tribes in South Africa.

Figure 7 presents W'Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya) wearing a *basotho* blanket that is traditionally worn by the Sotho people of Lesotho and South Africa (Karstel, 1995). W'Kabi is also seen with scarring on his cheeks in the shape of a crescent moon, mimicking the scarification practices of several African tribes whereby superficial incisions are made on the skin to create a raised scar (Garve et al., 2017).

Lastly, Figure 8 presents Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) further portraying scarification practices on the right and, on the left, wearing an *Igbo* mask – a mask that is marked by its distinctive masculine features and is traditionally worn by men of the Igbo tribe in south-eastern Nigeria during celebratory events (Okafor, 1991). Although the scars on Killmonger's body draw parallels to the sacred African tradition, many have argued that his character creates a negative association to the practice since, in the film, each scar is meant to represent each person Killmonger has killed as a U.S. Navy SEAL. As the main villain, many survey respondents believed that the nature of his character makes it easy to associate representations such as scarification with negative traits. One respondent opines that Killmonger “is displayed as a male in search of revenge from a

history of hurt, which is often how society portrays males of the same cultural or racial background.” Many other respondents used words like “violent,” “angry” and “stereotypical” to describe him. Although *Black Panther* succeeds in shining a light on more obscure aspects of African history and culture, consideration must therefore be given to the character portraying these representations in order for them to be recognized in a positive light by audiences.

Audible Representations

More subtle representations of Black identity and Africanity are portrayed audibly throughout the movie. The content analysis revealed that all protagonists in the film – the sole exception being American CIA operative Everett Ross (Martin Freeman) – have noticeable accents and non-Eurocentric names. In fact, the only Black character to have a Eurocentric name and no ‘African’ accent is Erik Killmonger. Though he is of Wakandan origin through his father, Killmonger, born N'Jadaka, adopted a Eurocentric name as a result of being raised in the United States. As a child, Killmonger’s father was murdered for treason by his own brother, King T’Chaka, which drove Killmonger to dedicate his life to avenging his father’s death by challenging T’Challa (T’Chaka’s son) for the Wakandan throne. Although Killmonger’s name is a product of his environment – he was raised in poverty-struck Oakland, California – the use of a Eurocentric name for the main antagonist may have been done in an attempt to reverse the conventional movie narrative that threats originate from developing countries.

According to the survey, African accents were one of the most memorable representations for many of the main characters. It was said to have stood out the most for T’Challa, second only

to his behaviour and demeanour, as respondents believed that his accent best embodied the themes of anti-colonialism and African identity. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Chadwick Boseman explained that “at one time they [Marvel Studios] were thinking he’d [T’Challa] have a European accent or an American accent. I said that would not be fine because if we did that, that would be saying that they had been colonized. That was something that I wanted to make sure happened, that we stuck to that in the character” (Phillips, 2016). By pushing for the Wakandan characters to speak with an accent, Boseman reinforces a “seductive depiction of an Africa unburdened by colonialism and slavery” and fosters a positive representation for those who struggle to accept their accents (Williams, 2018, p. 27). This is necessary in a movie aimed at youth, as one Canadian study indicates that young adults with pronounced accents when speaking English often experience perceived discrimination which causes them to have lower self-esteem (Freynet et al., 2020). The representation of characters with accents who are “authoritative, respectable, [and] worthy of being listened to” is therefore conducive in helping advance the anti-colonial narrative of the film, while also providing an illustration that is capable of changing the way people with accents are perceived in English-speaking societies (Attiah, 2020).

In addition to accents, several overarching themes were conveyed through dialogue. In some cases, the script uses humour to address topics such as anti-colonialism and challenging Western power structures. For example, when Agent Ross is brought into Wakanda with a bullet wound, Shuri sarcastically declares: “great, another broken White boy for us to fix;” referring to a character from a previous movie in the Marvel franchise who was sent to Wakanda to obtain a surgery that could only be performed using Vibranium technology (Coogler, 2018). Later in the movie, Ross wakes up from a deep sleep and takes Shuri by surprise when asking: “where am I?”

In reply, Shuri exclaims: “Don’t scare me like that, colonizer!” once again using humour to advance an anti-colonial discourse and poke fun at White saviour tropes (Coogler, 2018).

Similar themes were further addressed through Killmonger’s dialogue but using a much more serious tone. He presents topics such as African history, anti-oppression, and the challenging of Western power structures in a way that brings upon critical reflection. One survey respondent explains that many of Killmonger’s scenes allowed them to “reflect on how powerful Africa could have been on a global scale if they were not taken advantage of by western and colonial powers.” Another respondent explains that through his dialogue, Killmonger is “in some ways, the embodiment of the demand for reparations.” This is made clear as early as his first scene when Killmonger is examining ancient African artifacts in a British museum. When a museum employee states that one of the artifacts is from the 17th century’s Benin, Killmonger explains that the item is, in fact, from Wakanda, but was “taken by British soldiers in Benin,” alluding to the injustices suffered by the African nations that were ravaged by colonialism; he then offers to “take it off [their] hands”. When the employee explains that the items are not for sale, Killmonger replies: “How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?” (Coogler, 2018). This tone is maintained throughout the film, as Killmonger continues to use thought-provoking dialogue to promote his goal of social equity for Black individuals across the world. When he first arrives in Wakanda and demands to challenge King T’Challa for the throne, as per his birthright, he expresses his anger with the way Wakanda has been hoarding their wealth by stating that “there's about two billion people around the world who look like us and their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all,” but chooses not to (Coogler, 2018).

After defeating T'Challa in a first battle, Killmonger explains that under his regime, Wakanda will be an international leader in social aid, as it will reveal its true wealth and power to the world. He asserts that “the world’s going to start over and this time we’re on top!” once again pointing to the injustices that the West has historically inflicted on African countries (Coogler, 2018). One survey respondent explained that the way Killmonger conveyed these themes reminded them of Malcolm X, since he is “a leader who is fighting for retribution against the western world” and that, like Malcolm X, he believes that “justice and equality should be achieved by any means necessary.”

While this powerful use of dialogue helped convey many of the central themes in *Black Panther*, perhaps one of the most indelible statements of the film is the declaration Killmonger makes when he is faced with his death. After having been stabbed in the chest with a spear during his final battle with T'Challa, he is told he could still be healed. In response, Killmonger asks: “Why? So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage” (Coogler, 2018). This reference to the harsh reality behind the trans-Atlantic slave trade was arguably one of the most memorable lines of the entire movie because of the way it encapsulates the hundreds of years of African-American history and oppression that drove Killmonger to seek a better life for those who, like him, have endured hardship at the hands of systematic racism and oppression.

Female Representations

While representations of Black identity and of Africanicity remain the most prominent in this analysis and the most discussed by survey respondents, the frequent representation of women as warriors, tech moguls, and entities beyond their romantic relationships and maternal duties is a thematic element that must be highlighted. 63.6% of respondents indicated that the female representation in the movie stood out to them. One person explains that “women [in *Black Panther*] were seen as anything but weak, superior to men, or as damsels in distress. They were women of strong and powerful status that were given incredibly powerful roles of great responsibility.” When asked how they perceived certain characters, the majority of respondents indicated that they perceived two of the main female characters positively, with 93.9% indicating that they viewed the character of Shuri as a positive representation of a Black woman and 81.8% saying the same for Okoye. Several survey respondents pointed to the fact that the film portrays Black women as strong, independent, and assertive without being aggressive, with many using words like “intelligent,” “strong,” “independent” and “bad-ass” to qualify the female characters. This understanding of the female representation may be attributed to the fact that these qualities are at the forefront of their roles and are more accentuated than their race or gender. As explained by a *Washington Post* film analyst:

From the start, the story avoids the sexist tropes we are accustomed to watching on film. The women’s sex appeal is obvious but secondary to their personality and skill. They are strategic opponents in battle, saving the life of Black Panther T’Challa several times over. Equally entrusted with guiding and protecting the nation, they do not need to be rescued, sustained, or lauded by men (Lee, 2018).

This is made evident in multiple scenes. For instance, as early as the first 45 minutes of the movie, we see Okoye and Nakia dressed in floor-length gowns and high heels each fighting several men at once in a casino to save T'Challa. In the final battle, we see Shuri, a teenage girl, fighting Killmonger alone, using technology that she developed in order to save her country from exploitation. These examples illustrate that although the film's focus is on blackness and Africanity, its female representation is significant enough to have caught the attention of multiple survey respondents and prevail as one of the main themes of the movie.

Analysis and Discussion

Survey results suggest a strong correlation between the film's positive representations and its reception by the sample population. When asked to rate how much they enjoyed the movie on a scale of one to five – one being “didn't like it”, and five being “loved it” – 69.7% of respondents rated it a five, 27.3% rated it a four, and 3% rated it a three. Many respondents explained that they enjoyed the movie because of the way it identified and addressed sensitive themes in a way that is appreciative and educational, while also avoiding the tropes and racial stereotypes that are often seen in movies that are set in Africa or that address questions of Black identity. One survey respondent stated: “I love seeing African cultures represented in the mainstream culture/media in a way that doesn't feel exploitative of struggle.” Another explained that the film “gave us the opportunity to see an African country advanced in both its technology and economy without the need [for] foreign policy”; and a third participant stated: “I loved the representation of rich and beautiful Africa instead of the stereotypical underdeveloped/poor Africa. I also loved the historically accurate history of how museums acquired the foreign artifacts.”

These results support the hypothesis that the movie's success among Canadian young adults is partially due to its array of positive representations. While this is true, the audience members' reception of the film is also greatly influenced by their referential baggage. As per reception theory, a dominant reading of a media product typically occurs when the audience member understands and/or can identify with the message being presented, or, in this case, the representation being produced (Hall, 1973). To this effect, the positive reception of *Black Panther* by the sample population may be explained by the connection several members felt with the topic of the film.

Perhaps most evident is the connection Black respondents may have felt with the movie's representations of blackness and of Africanity. Black and biracial (Black and Caucasian) individuals make up about 43% of the sample population; within this cohort, 92% of respondents gave dominant readings, rating their enjoyment of the film either a four or a five out of five. If interpreting these results according to reception theory, this dominant position was likely adopted because many members of this group understood the more subtle messages being conveyed and/or because they could identify with the representations they saw. Results also point to the existence of an affective audience within the sample population due to the large number of respondents who admitted being able to identify with characters and other representations in *Black Panther*. For example, one person who rated her enjoyment of the movie a five explains: "As someone [whose] background is Ghanaian, I loved to see bits of my culture in mainstream media [...]. It really did warm my heart." Another person stated: "I am Nigerian and what I enjoyed about the movie is that it gave black people around the world the opportunity to see themselves as royalty and not just a

stereotype.” Similarly, a third respondent said: “As a Black African Woman, I have always viewed Black identity and African culture in a positive light. However, seeing the movie had really reinforced that for me and essentially gave us a ‘space’ that was never there before.”

Although no respondent indicated having a complete oppositional reading of the film, several Black and biracial respondents adopted a negotiated reading, arguing that certain depictions were misrepresentative of African cultures or contradictory to the overall tone of the film. For instance, while the variety of costumes, body art, and hairstyles presented in *Black Panther* was meant to pay homage to the multiplicity of cultures that exist within Africa, one respondent explained that they viewed this feature as a “performative representation of African-ness” because of the way it “lumped every African culture together and claimed that that’s how it is, when, in reality, Africa is incredibly diverse and very separated in states, tribes, ethnicities, etc.” A second respondent who adopted a negotiated reading explained that they appreciated the overall production and direction of the film, but were hesitant to accept the way it played into White saviourism; pointing out that Agent Ross was painted as a necessary ally to T’Challa, inferring that T’Challa would not have been able to defeat Killmonger without Ross’s help.

90% of non-Black respondents of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds also adopted a dominant reading position in that they were able to understand what Coogler was trying to convey with regard to African history, cultures and Africa’s relationship with the West. However, their reasons for adopting this reading position were largely based in the film’s educational significance, thus creating an acute contrast with the Black and biracial population’s interpretation of the film. Within the non-Black population of the sample, 70% of respondents claimed that *Black Panther*

somewhat changed their perceptions of blackness and ‘Africanicity,’ while 5% explained that their perceptions changed a lot after having viewed the film. Survey responses further illustrate this, as they revealed that the movie was perceived as an educational tool by most members of the non-Black population of the sample. One White respondent stated: “Some of this for me was learning about Africa and it’s [*sic.*] different parts as a whole. [...] I always viewed this movie as an empowering movie for the black community and they helped me learn when they empowered themselves.” Another one admitted: “I did not know much about black culture and identity prior to watching the movie, but after watching it sparked an interest in me to learn more and educate myself on the history.” A third respondent explained that they “had a basic understanding of Black identity and African culture before watching this movie (and a bunch of the interviews that came out with it), and [they] knew that it would mean a lot when it came out, but [they] learned a lot about specifically African culture,” probably referring to some of the traditional makeup, costumes and accessories presented in Appendix 1.

These responses are in stark contrast to those of the Black and biracial population of the sample, whose dominant readings were fed by the sense of pride and cultural celebration that the film provided, rather than its informational value. The gratification expressed by Black and biracial respondents was absent from the non-Black population’s survey responses, likely because they could not directly identify with the representations of blackness and of Africanicity as it was portrayed. Yet, the non-Black audience members were still able to adopt a dominant reading and show affective tendencies, since they were able to accept Coogler’s intended views by learning about blackness and Africanicity in a way that highlights triumph rather than suffering.

Irrespective of race, another possible reason for the dominant reading of this movie by the sample population is its strong representation of female characters. While just over 60% of the sample population identifies as female, respondents of both genders pointed to *Black Panther*'s compelling representations of women as independent, intelligent, and capable as justification for their dominant reading of the film. Although they may not be able to directly identify with many of the film's female representations, 50% of male respondents said they appreciated the way it presents women's role in society, with many of these respondents indicating that they understood how characters like Shuri and Okoye could be role models for young girls and women. Other male respondents claimed they were able to identify with the female characters because of the qualities they present outside their gender identity. One male respondent said they connected with Shuri's character because of the way she was "science-y but not too serious," thus illustrating that a dominant reading can still be adopted by those who are not the primary audience for specific cultural and gender articulations, as in this case.

The female representation in the film was expected to elicit a positive reaction from the female segment of the population. However, it was not expected to play such a large role in the adoption of a dominant reading by this audience. Feminist representations revealed the affective tendencies within the female audience, as almost all female respondents said that they were pleased and/or could identify with these representations. One respondent revealed that she identified with Shuri's character, stating: "I'm a scientist and Shuri's love of STEM resonated with me the most." Another expressed: "I think many different young Black girls and femmes⁵ can see themselves in

⁵ A word often used in the LGBTQIA2S+ community to describe an individual who exhibits a feminine identity (Kramarae, & Spender, 2000).

Shuri, which is amazing considering there weren't really any other royalty representations like Shuri in other franchises.” The same can be said for the characters of Okoye and Nakia. One respondent asserted that “Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira are show stopping throughout the film that also passes the Bechdel test which doesn't happen often in Marvel movies.” On the topic of Okoye, another respondent noted: “I genuinely can't think of a single thing that isn't incredible about Okoye and the representation of strength she brings to all women and femmes, especially Black women and femmes, is insurmountable.” These testimonials promulgate the role feminist representations played in the adoption of a dominant reading by this audience, as well as the extent to which these representations matter for intersectional minority groups.

Overall, the reception of the film by the sample population was generally positive, as the reading positions adopted were mostly dominant. However, survey responses make it clear how diverse the perceptions of the sample population truly are, as no two respondents provided a dominant reading for the same reasons. With the help of reception theory, we can therefore conclude that the film's varied positive representations did in fact contribute to its success among Canadian young adults, despite the fact that one's reception of a specific media representation greatly depends on their lived experience, their cultural knowledge, and their social identities.

Beyond reception theory, a combination of critical race theory (CRT) and gaze theory may also be used to interpret why *Black Panther* was so successful among Canadian youth, and how the film's representations impacted the way blackness is perceived by this audience. Both these theories are incorporated into the film as *Black Panther* actively exposes and confronts White/colonial and male gazes with the help of counter-storytelling and oppositional gazes.

Counter-storytelling is a pillar of CRT that, according to Cunningham (2019), “involves subverting [...] majoritarian norms, oftentimes through reconstruction or reimagination” to combat racism and other forms of intersectional discrimination (p. 39). It is used throughout the film by depicting Wakanda as independent and self-sufficient, as opposed to the more common representation of Africa as a poor continent that relies on international social aid to survive. The movie reinforces this counter narrative by presenting Wakanda as the provider (rather than the receiver) of social aid, as the epicentre of international intelligence, and as one of the richest and most technologically advanced countries in the world. In doing so, it challenges traditional White saviour and Western superiority narratives and mobilizes a social commentary on Africa’s traditional ability to contribute to international conversations on knowledge production. Counter-storytelling is also mobilized through the oppositional gaze that is invoked throughout the movie. This is most obvious in a post-credit scene where T’Challa appears before the United Nations and declares that Wakanda has decided to share their knowledge and resources with the outside world “to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other.” After his address, a Caucasian board member with a European accent publicly asks: “With all due respect, King T’Challa, what can a nation of farmers offer the rest of the world?” causing the crowd to clamour. To this reaction, T’Challa, Nakia and Okoye simply smirk and slyly look toward Agent Ross in the crowd before the screen cuts to black (Coogler, 2018). The statement made by the board member epitomizes the colonial gaze White-dominant nations instill upon Africa. Through this gaze, we understand that African countries are viewed as necessitous of help and are incapable of providing meaningful contributions to international prosperity. *Black Panther* challenges this narrative with its counter-storytelling and its positive representations of

Africanicity, thereby providing a refreshing depiction that allows audiences to build a more favourable image of Africa and of its socio-economic capabilities.

Another foundational principle of CRT that is well grasped in *Black Panther* is that of intersectionality. In CRT, intersectionality can be understood as the way multiple aspects of one's identity may converge and interact with one another to create various levels of privilege or disadvantage (Gillborn, 2015). In *Black Panther*, intersectionality is mainly embraced through positive representations of Black women. This group's position at the intersection of race and gender identity means that they are affected by both the male and the White gaze concurrently. As explained by Brooks and Hébert (2006), "popular culture has commodified the black female body as hypersexed"; which results in the adverse representations of Black women that we often see in today's mass media (p. 300). *Black Panther* successfully challenges these intersecting gazes by mobilizing a strong oppositional gaze through its Black female characters. Not only are none of the characters sexualized, but they are multidimensional and are shown to have interests outside men and children. For instance, Nakia refuses to give up her work for T'Challa, who offers to make her his queen; Shuri is not shown to have a love interest; and, Okoye is seen telling her love interest, W'Kabi, that she will kill him if it means protecting her country. The all-female Dora Milaje could also be considered a personification of this oppositional gaze, as they are a group of bald Black women whose sexuality takes a backseat to their abilities and whose appearance and role vehemently defy the beauty standards and gender roles imposed by the White male gaze.

The male gaze is further averted by showing male characters in times of weakness; particularly T'Challa who is meant to embody super-heroic traits. An oppositional gaze is superimposed as T'Challa is seen being saved by Black female characters on numerous occasions, thereby reversing the typical “damsel in distress” trope and presenting women who exhibit strength, tenacity, and heroism. One respondent even remarked: “It was nice to see that the female actress did not need to be saved by a man,” while another pointed to the importance of seeing “a male character show vulnerability and strength towards other female characters.” This subversion of traditional gender roles creates a “disarticulation and re-articulation of traditional meanings and practices” that provides viewers with the opportunity to escape the constraints of traditional ideologies and attribute their own meaning to these representations (Ebanda De B'Berl, 2007. p. 106).

While the intersectional representations in the film are progressive in many regards, scholars and fans alike have pointed out that the movie’s intersectionality could have been extended considering the presence of a lesbian relationship in the original story that was erased from the movie. Michaela Meyer (2020) explains:

While I certainly do not wish to take away from the film's accomplishments, I was also struck by what was absent in this cinematic retelling of the comic book series—the lesbian relationship between women warriors Ayo and Aneka in the Dora Milaje, the protectors of both Black Panther and Wakanda. Their relationship is well documented in the most recent comic book runs of Black Panther and World of Wakanda; yet, Ayo (who is second-in-command of the Dora Milaje in these articulations) is relegated to a minor film role, and her romantic life is completely omitted. In April 2017, Vanity Fair reported on a leaked scene between Okoye and Ayo wherein they lock eyes, Okoye says, “You look good,” and Ayo responds with a grin saying, “I know.” Several fans felt the scene marked Ayo's queer sexuality in ways previously absent from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Yet, when the film was released, the scene in question had been deleted (p. 263).

By including Ayo's sexual orientation in the film, and by providing her with a more prominent role, further positive representations would have been possible, thereby making the film even more progressive, and appealing to a vaster audience who may not have seen themselves represented on screen in such manner before. Nevertheless, the representations of Black women in *Black Panther* already diverge greatly from the representations typically given of this identity group. Despite not being as intersectional as they could have been, *Black Panther* still typifies intersectionality in a way that challenges the White male gaze and establishes new standards for Black female representation on screen.

In using reception theory, CRT, and gaze theory concurrently to interpret results from the survey and the content analysis, it becomes clear that the film was so successful among Canadian young adults not only because of its representations of blackness, but also thanks to its female representations. The extent to which the female representations in this movie resonated with the sample population illustrates why diverse portrayals are not only welcomed, but are also necessary. To this effect, the film's critical, cultural, and commercial success can be explained by the audience's ability to identify with the representations of blackness, 'Africanicity' and feminism portrayed in the movie.

These three theories were also helpful in providing insight into how these representations may have affected societal perceptions of blackness and of Africanicity with Canadian young adults. While there is no doubt that these representations were meaningful, a divide exists in respondents' opinion on the amplitude of their impact. Indeed, while many said they gained

valuable insight into the intricacies of Black identity, African history and cultures, and American colonialism through this movie, over 45% of respondents claimed that their perceptions of these topics did not change after they watched the film. When asked to elaborate, many explained that their perceptions of blackness are independent of media portrayals and that they felt they already had a thorough understanding of the implications of Black identity, African history and cultures, and American colonialism. While this is probable, it is also necessary to note that the survey was designed to only reveal conscious biases. As such, there is a strong possibility that several of the respondents who claimed they did not experience a change in perception, in fact, experienced changes in their unconscious biases. With this said, it is difficult to truly gauge the magnitude of *Black Panther's* impact on perceptions of blackness and Africanity among Canadian young adults, since many of these perceptions may have only been altered at the unconscious level.

Though some respondents perceived *Black Panther* as nothing more than a socially aware media product that was gratifying, but not revolutionary, it was an informational tool that acted as a foundation for further education on the presented themes for many. Given this divide, there is no precise answer to this research question, since the extent of the film's impact on perceptions of blackness and of Africanity seems to be strongly dependent on socio-demographic factors, such as racial/ethnic background and gender identity, as well as respondents' awareness of their biases. Still, despite the differences in opinion and perception, it is indisputable that *Black Panther* had a substantial impact on North American popular culture and greatly contributed to furthering the conversation on diversity in film.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This research has been guided by the principle that media representations are significant and have a considerable influence over societal and individual perceptions. The use of a survey and a qualitative content analysis helped us to reveal exactly how mass media representations can affect awareness and perception of specific issues in young adult audiences. To confirm the thesis formulated in the problematization, the positive representations of blackness, of African cultures and history, and of feminism portrayed in *Black Panther* each played an important role in the film's success and contributed to the (re-)education of what these things mean in a colonial context for several viewers.

These conclusions were established with the help of the combined use of reception theory, critical race theory, and gaze theory. In concert, they provided a framework that allows for the interpretation of survey and content analysis results, serving in dissecting both the manifest and latent content behind the film's representations. In doing so, the study successfully explored what meanings audience members could attribute to certain representations and why, as well as how certain representations could elicit affective responses in audience members. By using such a framework, we were able to obtain a multifaceted view of mass media representations, what they entail, and their consequences, making way for an analysis that considers perspectives from a variety of schools of thought in several academic fields.

Adopting this approach exposed Canadian young adults' desire for more positive on-screen representations of historically marginalized groups, propelling an analysis of how and why *Black*

Panther was considered a turning point in popular culture. Ultimately, this highlighted how the film acted as a catalyst for discussions about the need of more positive and accurate media representations of the Black identity and of Africanity in the mainstream media. This accentuated many of the psychological, sociological, and critical-cultural implications of mass media representations, as it demonstrated how positive representations could impact societal, individual, and self-perception in Canadian young adults.

Perhaps most intriguing is the implication of race and the role it plays in the interpretation of representations in media products with racial undertones. While respondents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds were able to appreciate the film's representations of Black identity and of Africanity, Black and Black-biracial respondents seemed to best identify with these representations. Many Black and biracial respondents called upon their racial/ethnic background to explain why the portrayed representations meant so much to them and how they contributed to helping their identity group feel 'seen'. These results illustrated exactly why the continued positive representations of historically underrepresented groups in contemporary media products are not only appreciated, but are paramount to the development of positive racial identities and the development of a sense of community.

Though it provided comprehensive results that allowed for the exploration of corresponding avenues, the use of anonymous surveys made it difficult to determine the full extent of *Black Panther*'s impact on the studied population's perceptions. Since surveys do not permit for the in-depth exploration of answers, the ability to extract further meaning from responses limited the scope of the analysis. The discussion was further restricted by the fact that the survey

was designed to only reveal conscious biases, and thereby could not be used to evaluate changes in subconscious perceptions in viewers. While the examination of unconscious biases could have further informed how the film's representations impacted young Canadians' perceptions, this would not have been feasible in the context of this research, since such a study would require a different research design. Nevertheless, a future study using qualitative interviews or focus groups could be used to examine the changes in perception within a specific population by comparing how audience members viewed Black identity and 'Africanicity' both before and after they watched *Black Panther*.

As a movie that touched millions of people across the world with its representations and inspired many more to further their knowledge and understanding of blackness and of Africanicity, *Black Panther's* status as a film that embodies strength, resilience, and resistance is undeniable. As the second installment of the franchise, *Black Panther II: Wakanda Forever*, is set to be released in the summer of 2022, many have expressed their excitement regarding the revival of Wakanda and what this will mean for the future of minority media representations. *Black Panther's* overwhelmingly positive reception by international audiences exemplifies exactly why representation matters and exposes young adult audience's desire for more representations of this kind. The interest in the upcoming installment and the esteem surrounding the first movie has made it clear that *Black Panther* has left its mark on the world of cinema; not only in terms of its critical, cultural, and commercial success, but because of the way it has proven that positive media representations can be portrayed in a way that balances education and entertainment.

Appendix 1: Black Panther Costume Design



Figure 1: T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) wearing a formal dashiki-inspired suit on the left and the Black Panther suit, designed with an Okavango pattern, on the right.



Figure 2: Okoye (Danai Gurira) and the Dora Milaje, dressed in battle gear inspired by the real-life Dahomey Amazons, a group of female warriors from the Kingdom of Dahomey.



Figure 3: Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) wearing Xhosa-inspired tribal face paint and the River Tribe Elder (Isaach de Bankolé) sporting ceremonial lip and ear plates, a practice for which the Ethiopian Mursi tribe is known.

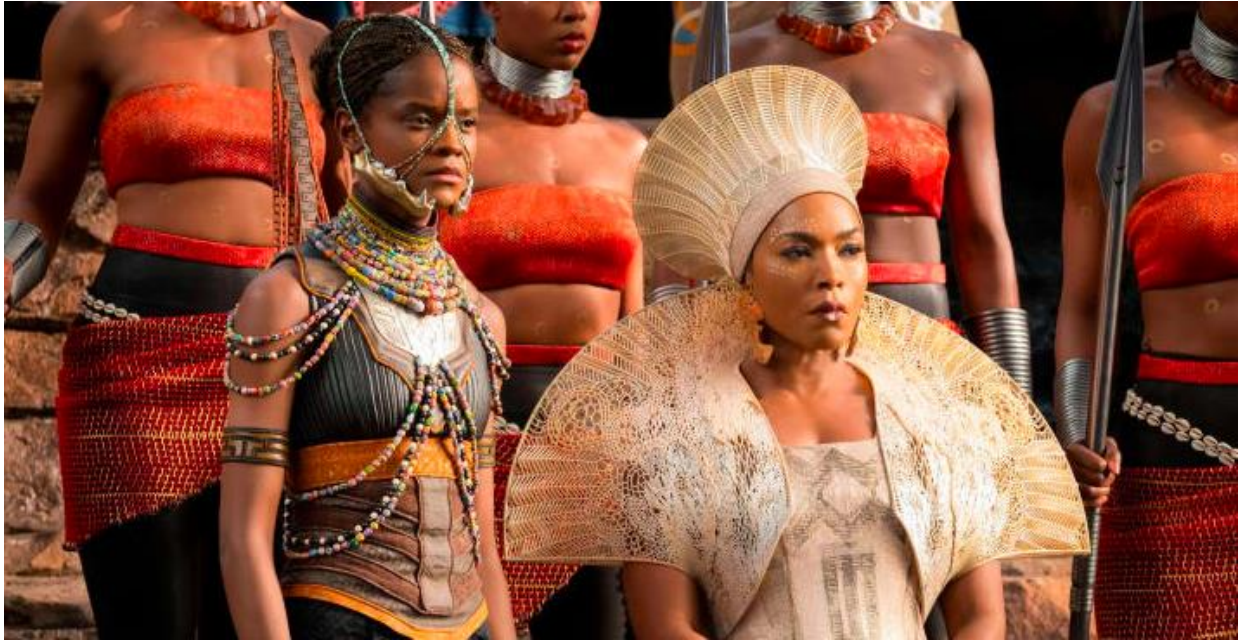


Figure 4: On the left: Shuri (Letitia Wright) wearing bright beading in varied colours, traditionally worn by women of various African tribes, a spear-corset inspired by the Dinka tribe of South Sudan, as well as a distinct animal jaw headdress. On the right: Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett) wearing a traditional Zulu hat (*isicholo*).



Figure 5: On the left: the Mining Tribe Elder (Connie Chiume), wearing a clay hairstyle most famously worn by the Himba women of Namibia, as well as some traditional beading on her head and around her neck. On the right: an unnamed mining tribe member wearing traditional African beading around his arms and wrists as well as a headdress inspired by that of the Maasai people of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania.



Figure 6: Zuri (Forest Whitaker) wearing an ornamental robe, inspired by the agbada worn in West Africa. Zuri’s face is also painted to mimic the practices of the Xhosa tribes in South Africa.



Figure 7: W’Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya) wearing a Basotho blanket, traditionally worn by the Sotho people of Lesotho and South Africa, and with scarring on his cheeks, mimicking the scarification practices of several African tribes.



Figure 8: Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) further portraying scarification practices on the right, and on the left, wearing an Igbo mask.

Appendix 2: Consent Form

PARTICIPATION

This survey is part of a major research project entitled “Media Matters: A Critical Analysis of *Black Panther*’s Role in the Pursuit of Cultural and Racial Media Representation.” Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. You are also free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason. Completing the survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes.

PARTICIPATION CRITERIA

There are 4 requirements to participate in this study:

- (1) You are between the ages of 18 and 30.
- (2) You are a resident (not necessarily a citizen) of Canada or the United States of America.
- (3) You have seen the 2018 film *Black Panther* in its entirety at least once.
- (4) You have general knowledge of current popular culture.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this survey.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

Survey answers will be shared directly with the researcher via Google Forms, where the data will be stored in a password-protected electronic format on the researcher’s personal computer. The collected data will remain confidential and will be retained for a period of five years following the submission of the project for research integrity purposes.

No identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address will be collected and your responses will remain anonymous. We will not be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study for any reason, your survey answers and the affiliated data will be electronically destroyed.

CONTACT

The research team is composed of Geneviève Laurent, principal investigator and M.A. student at the University of Ottawa, and Dr. Boulou Ebanda de B’Béri, research supervisor and full professor at the University of Ottawa. If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact Geneviève at glaur061@uottawa.ca or Dr. Ebanda de B’Béri at ddboulou@uottawa.ca.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the University of Ottawa Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or by telephone (613-562-5387).

ELECTRONIC CONSENT

Please select your choice below. Clicking on the “Agree” button indicates that:

- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You meet all of the participation criteria

You are invited to save or print a copy of this informed consent form for your records.

I have read the above disclaimer and agree to take part in this survey.

- Agree
- Disagree

Appendix 3: Questionnaire

1. Age: To what age group do you belong?

- 18-20
- 21-24
- 25-30
- Prefer not to answer

2. Gender: How do you identify?

- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer
- Prefer to self-describe:

3. Residence: In which of the following countries do you reside?

- Canada
- United States of America
- Other:

4. Race: With what racial/ethnic group(s) do you best identify? You may select more than one answer if you are a person of mixed origin.

- White/Caucasian
- Black
- Asian
- South Asian
- Indigenous
- Arab
- Latin American
- Other:

5. On the following scale, please rate how familiar you are with current popular culture.

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all familiar Very familiar

6. Have you seen the 2018 film *Black Panther* in its entirety at least once?

- Yes
- No

7. Please rate how much you enjoyed the movie *Black Panther* on the following scale:

1 2 3 4 5

Didn't like it Loved it

8. Please explain why you did or did not like the movie.

9. How would you rate *Black Panther's* impact on current popular culture?

1 2 3 4 5

Very weak Impact Very strong impact

10. In your opinion, what constitutes a positive media representation?

11. In your opinion, what constitutes a negative media representation?

12. How would you rate the representations of Black people and Black culture in *Black Panther*?

- All positive
- Mostly positive
- Some positive, some negative
- Mostly negative
- All negative

13. What about the character of T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) stood out the most to you? (You may select more than one answer)

- Costume/Dress
- Speech/Accent
- Hair
- Name
- Attitude
- Behaviour
- Other:

14. How would you describe these representations of T'Challa, as a Black man, in comparison to current representations in popular media?

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

15. Please explain your answer to the previous question.

16. In your opinion, are the representations of T'Challa generally more similar or different from representations of other Black men in current popular media?

1 2 3 4 5

Extremely similar Extremely different

17. What about the character of Shuri (Letitia Wright) stood out the most to you? (You may select more than one answer).

- Costume/Dress
- Speech/Accent
- Hair
- Name
- Attitude
- Behaviour
- Other:

18. How would you describe these representations of Shuri, as a Black woman, in comparison to current representations in popular media?

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

19. Please explain your answer to the previous question.

20. In your opinion, are the representations of Shuri generally more similar or different from representations of other Black women in current popular media?

1 2 3 4 5

Extremely similar Extremely different

21. What about the character of Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) stood out the most to you? (You may select more than one answer).

- Costume/Dress
- Speech/Accent
- Hair
- Name
- Attitude
- Behaviour
- Other:

22. How would you describe these representations of Killmonger, as a Black man, in comparison to current representations in popular media?

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

23. Please explain your answer to the previous question.

24. In your opinion, are the representations of Killmonger generally more similar or different from representations of other Black men in current popular media?

1 2 3 4 5

Extremely similar Extremely different

25. What about the character of Okoye (Danai Gurira) stood out the most to you? (You may select more than one answer).

- Costume/Dress
- Speech/Accent
- Hair
- Name
- Attitude
- Behaviour
- Other:

26. How would you describe these representations of Okoye, as a Black woman, in comparison to current representations in popular media?

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

27. Please explain your answer to the previous question.

28. In your opinion, are the representations of Okoye generally more similar or different from representations of other Black women in current popular media?

1 2 3 4 5

Extremely similar Extremely different

29. Considering the answers you have provided, would you say your perceptions of Black identity and of African culture have changed after viewing *Black Panther*?

- Yes, a lot
- Yes, somewhat
- Not at all

30. Please explain your answer to the previous question.

31. Can you recall consuming any media products that had representations similar to those presented in *Black Panther* in the last five (5) years?

- Yes
- No
- I don't recall

32. If you answered "yes" to the previous above, what was this media product? (e.g., movie title, TV show, book, etc.). If you answered "no" or "do not recall" simply mark N/A.

33. If you could describe *Black Panther's* representations of blackness and Black/African culture in one word, what word would you use?

34. OPTIONAL: Please provide any further comments or opinions you may have about the topic.

Appendix 4: Certificate of Ethics Approval

25/06/2021

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-05-21-6898
Titre du projet / Project Title	Media Matters: Black Panther's Role in the Fight for Representation
Type de projet / Project Type	Mémoire de maîtrise / Master's major research paper
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	25/06/2021
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	24/06/2022

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
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