Inclusion and Diversity Practices in Children's Media

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Abstract

Adolescents deliberately search for media content by which they can shape their identity,. Up until recently, the majority of media have been inundated with Eurocentric ideals. Media representation of "othered" identities has mostly gone unquestioned. Considering the innumerable stereotypes that media perpetuate, the invisibility or stereotyped portrayals of minority characters can evoke feelings of shame and self-hatred in adolescent viewers. This thesis consisted of two parts: interviews with prominent children's media creators about their practices on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in terms of both content and production of content, and interviews with peers about how they felt as adolescents viewing some of this content. The results are presented both in a written thesis and in a filmed documentary that illuminates some of the main themes of the interviews.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I began pressing my hair at the age of six. The process involves running a hot comb heated to a scorching temperature of at least 149 ℉ through my tightly coiled curls. I was too young to understand the irreparable damage I caused to my hair, let alone the deeply rooted self-hatred which inspired my curl carnage. I did know one thing was certain: long, straight hair was beautiful and mine was not. It wasn't just my friends, all of whom were white, who were graced with this seemingly undebatable beauty standard; the combination of light skin and waist-length hair characterized each of my favorite characters as well. For years I burned away the natural texture of my hair to make room for ideals impressed upon me through systems of oppression -- media, unbeknownst at the time, the biggest perpetrator. Academic institutions have provided me the language and skills with which to separate learned biases from my own self-perception, but this privilege is an anomaly. Inclusion and subsequent representation of marginalized identities carry significant repercussions in relation to adolescent identity formation, particularly for those unlike me who do not have access to resources that higher education provides.

Some research exists on adolescent beliefs, attitudes and well-being as they relate to media exposure, though by no means does it provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the relationship dynamic given the evolutionary nature of media. There is also considerable research illuminating the ways harmful attitudes toward marginalized identities (e.g. race, gender, LGBTQ+) are represented in mainstream media culture, though these studies fail to consider tangible effects of said attitudes on adolescent development. We do know, however, that the majority of media content is inundated with Eurocentric ideals about beauty, goodness and

social relations, and large media corporations control the narrative with their choice to represent –or not – certain identities (Fisherkeller, 1999). Effects of stereotypes and erasure on adolescent development have yet to be researched extensively.

As technology increases in accessibility (Hitlin, 2018), life as we know it today has become inextricable from media. It is arguably the most pervasive and potentially harmful stimuli with which adolescents engage. A report conducted by Common Sense Media (2017) found that children between the ages of 0-8 spend approximately 1.5-3.5 hours each day engaging in entertainment screen time, with children from lower income households consuming more screen media than children from middle and higher income households. Moreover, research indicates that Black and Brown children spend disproportionately more time in front of screens (Carson & Kuzik, 2017) in comparison to their white counterparts.

Two defining characteristics of adolescence are rapid cognitive and physical development throughout the transition from childhood to adulthood (Erikson, 1993; Erikson, 1994), and increased impressionability (Grisso, 2006). Given these circumstances, adolescents are highly susceptible to stimuli within their environment. Consequences of media saturation to this extent are difficult to delineate, though theory provides an important foundation to conceptualize long-term effects of television. George Gerber and Larry Gross's cultivation theory (1975) maintains its relevance in contemporary discussions of television's influence on perceived reality. One might consider cultivation theory in an examination of the relationship between adolescent impressionability and media consumption. As adolescents construct their understanding of the social world, internalized takeaways from media may inform thoughts and behaviors toward others and one's self.

Adolescents deliberately search for media content by which they can shape their own identities (Eggermont, 2006). Though fictional, media impacts adolescent identity formation in a way that is real, and the ways media portrays a given identity informs adolescent beliefs on normativity. Considering the innumerable stereotypes that media perpetuates, representation of any identity that is not a white, hetereosexual male one can evoke feelings of shame and self-hatred. This is especially detrimental to adolescents who receive their first exposure to a given identity through media (Bond, 2014). Research suggests that effects of mass media exposure can influence role models and blur the line between reality and fantasy (Mehraj, 2014), a finding that may prove harmful over time should media exposure continue to replace first-person interactions and impart unconscious bias upon adolescent viewers. Research also indicates a negative correlation between media and self-esteem of adolescents from marginalized communities (Browne-Graves, 2002). As adolescents negotiate individuality with societal norms, personal outcomes may favor the status quo. In doing so, adolescents risk low self-efficacy in adulthood (Holstrom et al., 2015), which compromises their mental health, coping skills and self-esteem. This is far from inconsequential; high self-efficacy enables positive personal relationships, persistence in difficult tasks and academic achievement (Creer et al., 1993; Mann et al., 2004; Yusuf, 2011; Tsang et al., 2012).

In light of the widespread racial reckoning in conversation today, content creators are more conscious than ever about representation and inclusion. Public pressure to tell inclusive stories has evolved not only to diversify the production process (e.g. POC writers, producers, etc.) but also to employ external consultants/advisors whose expertise informs decisions made throughout the production process. Given this shift, interviews with content creators provide data used to glean contemporary attitudes toward representation in children's media and related

initiatives to rectify a history of harmful stereotypes and erasure. In order to learn from the past as media continues toward the future, I will also conduct interviews with peers of color about the role of representation -- or lack thereof -- in their identity formation and overall development. It is vital for children to understand media images, effects they have, and what content creators can do to ensure the prevalence of authentic and inclusive content.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature provides a foundation for inquiry into potentially harmful effects of media representation on adolescent social emotional development. Adolescents interpret biological differences in tandem with social cues in order to inform their own beliefs about others and themselves. Messages in media pertaining to difference can have adverse side effects on adolescent development, particularly for children who do not fit into traditional molds of goodness, beauty, etc. that have been normalized by mainstream media. Lasting effects of stereotyped portrayals and exclusion have yet to be determined, but research suggests that adolescent exposure to such media can prove harmful.

Children Understand Difference

A common argument made against increased inclusion and diversity in children's media is that children are too young to understand difference, but research indicates the contrary (Pauker, Williams & Steele, 2016). In fact, Pauker et al. posit that children can perceive racial differences when they are just 3 months old, and by 6 months can categorize faces by race. The researchers also describe the tendency for infants to exhibit visual preference for faces that resemble their own, and with time begin to demonstrate a decreased capacity for differentiation between other-race faces (Kelly et al., 2005; Kinzler & Spelke, 2011; Pauker et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017). Between 2.5 and 5 years old, toddlers absorb social stereotypes, attitudes, and ideas about others and themselves (Derman-Sparks, Higa & Sparks, 1980). Each of these findings directly undermines the prevalent ideology maintained by many in the U.S. that children are "color-blind," or unconscious of race and prejudice.

Research indicates that by ages 3-4, most children display an unsophisticated conceptualization of race and can label other individuals by their racial category (Ramsey, 2009). In a review of early and contemporary research on children's comprehension and responses to difference, Ramsey states that elementary school children begin to attribute social connotations to physical appearance. In doing so, children further elaborate their concepts of race, though they do not totally comprehend the associated implications of race until late adolescence/adulthood. Over the course of two years, researchers Derman-Sparks et al. (1980) asked teachers and parents to remark upon children's questions and comments about racial issues at different ages. Framed within Piaget's cognitive development theory, researchers found that questions asked by non-white children between 3-5 denoted a keen awareness of racial issues and indicated the formulation of racial identity by identifying salient attributes of groups including their own. Derman-Sparks et al. postulate that this development requires the child to understand whether attributes remain constant, a skill which many children struggle to grasp given a common "desire to change" (Derman-Sparks 10) into another identity. Rationalization for such transformation is often the product of racist metanarratives that already permeate their biases (Derman-Sparks et al., 1980), though alternative possibilities remain. Researchers reference early studies conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in which non-white children displayed a delayed identification with the dolls they resembled as opposed to white children (McMillan, 1988; Bonvillain & Huston, 2000; Fishbein, 2002; Dulin-Keita et al., 2011). Favor of the white dolls, thus white identity, may indicate the valuation of whiteness rather than actual racial awareness (Dulin-Keita et al., 2011). In other words, the inherent devaluation of non-white identities is embedded within adolescent concepts of race at an early age, and if continually reinforced may evolve into prejudice against others and/or oneself.

Representation in Media Affects Adolescent Development

There is a plethora of literature pertaining to media's effect on adolescent development that is rooted in theory about learning and cognition (Scheibe, 2007). Theories such as Bandura's *social learning theory* -- later known as *social cognitive theory* -- (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2002) and *information processing theories* (Miller, 1956; Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974) are often used as frameworks for examining television's effect on children because they aid in identification of possible psychological processes in which effects occur, help explain how children process the information received from media, and enable researchers to interpret the relationship between adolescent development and media in lieu of credible theoretical explanations for how the variables relate to one another given the relative novelty of media (Scheibe, 2007). Bandura's social learning theory (1977) suggests that children observe and imitate role models in their social environment, and often model their behavior on actions perceived as either acceptable or unacceptable. Media provides adolescents with an array of potential role models both real and fictional, and the extent to which children identify with onscreen role models may influence their prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Scheibe, 2007). Essentially, social learning/cognitive theory may be used to predict the ways that onscreen characters inform adolescent cognition and behavior toward identities represented -- or not -- in media.

Information processing (Miller, 1956; Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974), though not developmental theories, may be used to speculate children's comprehension of media content and their subsequent beliefs formed as a result of the exposure. In consideration of informational processing theories, children are likely to base their belief systems on erroneous sources in the media, and are less likely to interrogate fictional stories because their implicit

knowledge of the real world is severely limited (Scheibe, 2007). Thus, information in the media that is inundated with stereotypes and outdated sociocultural standards may incorrectly inform adolescent schemas of gender, race, etc. Blake (2002) propounds that adolescents will likely use information from the media as a tool for assimilation, and identifies mass media culture as "a major mechanism by which ideals of multiculturalism, sexuality, and sometimes violence are introduced to the adolescent," (Blake, 2002, p. 76).

Such findings convey significant implications in regard to adolescent identity formation. Specifically, the construction of one's identity requires acceptance and valuing of self (Blake, 2002), which is a difficult feat given the prevalence of unfavorable representation of marginalized identities in mainstream media, especially racial/ethnic minorities (Gandy, 2001). Graves (2002) examines the influence of media (particularly television) on adolescent cognition regarding racial groups. She asserts that role portrayals of minority identities and interracial relations have the propensity to develop into prejudice and discrimination of unfavorably represented groups. Graves suggests that television programming informs adolescent viewers about social groups in their decision to include or exclude diverse groups. Additionally, she posits that the absence of a given minority group on mainstream television implies its inconsequence and powerlessness relative to groups that *are* included. Graves proposes that this "information can contribute to the development, maintenance, and modification of children's thoughts, feelings, and actions toward racial/ethnic groups," (Graves, 2002, p. 708). Alternatively stated, the restricted inclusion of racial/ethnic groups in television programming perpetuates systems of oppression to adolescent viewers, and discriminatory portrayals of minorities are utilized in the maintenance of prejudice and stereotypes among children. Derman-Sparks et al. (1980) reflect upon the continuation of inaccurate, biased information

displayed in the media as specially detrimental to youth who have yet to fully form concepts of themselves and others.

Researchers Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman and Stone (2008) explore the consequences of common heavily-stereotyped images associated with American Indians on the self-concept of American Indian students. Their findings suggest that this representation proved harmful to American Indian students in regard to their sense of self-esteem, community worth and self-efficacy because the images both reminded and perpetuated the extremely limited scope of respect extended to American Indian communities by the U.S. at large. In a similar vein, researchers Fryberg and Townsend (2008) examine the possible negative psychological effects on individuals who lack "rich and varied social representations" (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). Furthermore, Tukachinsky et al. (2017) analyzed the relationship between television representation of racial/ethnic minority groups and feelings associated with Black and Latino students' respective ingroups. Their results exhibited a correlative relationship between negative representation of Black and Latino groups and reduced appreciation for their respective ingroups (Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Findings from Tukachinsky et al. signify a potential threat to minority identity formation as a result of negative media representation. Moreover, the study provides implications for the significant positive effects that the inclusion of ethnic minority characters has on adolescent viewers.

Mok (1998) employs a historical approach to delineate pervasive stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans in mainstream media such as the "model minority" (Mok, 1998, p. 192) and "exotic, alien" (Mok, 1998, p. 189) tropes, thus creating a binary of good vs. evil that may inform American beliefs that Asian individuals pose a threat either in competition or moral corruption. Moreover, Mok utilizes interviews with Asian Americans to glean first-hand

accounts of how they are affected by portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in mainstream U.S. media. The accounts revealed that Asian Americans felt their race was a "potent, perhaps limiting factor in their perceptions of who is considered attractive" (Mok, 1998, p. 199) given the prevalence of Eurocentric beauty standards in the United States. These findings support existing research on the media's effect on ideals of beauty and goodness (Fisherkeller, 1999).

Aronson et al. (2013) discuss further implications of stereotypes on minority health. The researchers describe stereotype threat as the psychological process by which one confronts negative stereotypes regarding race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., and identify possible effects such as anxiety, negative thoughts and feelings, decreased effort and performance expectations, and lowered professional goals. Though this study does not examine the influence of stereotypes in the media on adolescent development, it establishes a relationship between stereotypes and adverse emotional health among minorities, a correlation which supports the notion that stereotypes -- regardless of the method by which they are transmitted -- may negatively affect adolescent mental well-being and perceived ability (Aronson et al., 2013). In a similar vein, Dulin-Keita et al. (2011) employ a modified racism-related stress model in order to investigate a potential connection between racial discrimination and self-esteem. Their findings suggest that racial/ethnic minorities interpret racial discrimination as salient stressors which in turn contribute to low self-esteem. Researchers Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015) discuss possible mitigation efforts to decrease the influence of negative media portrayals, most salient of which being media literacy education.

History of Biased and Stereotypical Representation in Media

Children have historically been heavy media consumers (Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008), thus susceptible to the plethora of stereotypical representation to which they are exposed.

Content analyses provide a detailed lens through which researchers may examine the history of biased representation in mainstream media. Barcus (1971) conducted one of the first content analyses on children's programming and noted several instances of stereotyped representation. He examined Saturday children's programming (i.e. television and advertisements) on Boston commercial television stations. Among his findings was a significant lack of representation pertaining to racially and ethnically diverse characters. Specifically, his content analysis revealed that 73% commercial announcements contained white-only characters, 24% contained a combination of white and minority characters, and just 3% contained minority-only characters (Barcus, 1971). Such exclusion relates to media's perpetuation of oppression systems which position minority groups inferior to white individuals regarding power, importance, and value.

Content analysis conducted by researchers Dobrow and Gidney (1998) revealed a slight increase in representation of racial/ethnic minorities, though only 16.7% of characters were coded as non-white. Increased visibility of racial/ethnic minority characters enabled the researchers to make closer examinations of identity portrayals with regard to race and ethnicity. Specifically, their findings indicated that more recent shows veered away from the standard "dark equals bad" (Dobrow & Gidney, 1998, p. 10) representation and established color variation among both heroic and villainous characters. Additionally, the researchers identified the emergence of shows featuring linguistically diverse characters such as *C-Bear and Jamal* (Jones & Jones, 1996-1997), and remarked that the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the show did not convey stereotypes (Dobrow & Gidney, 1998). Dobrow and Gidney's content analysis indicates a shift toward more inclusion of racial/ethnic minorities and non-stereotyped representation, but the majority of children's programming remained plagued by bias at that time.

Bramlett-Solomon and Roeder (2008) orchestrated a content analysis of Nickelodeon commercials with specific regard to representations of race and ethnicity. Whereas previous children's programming content analyses had spanned a maximum of one week, Bramlett-Solomon and Roeder observed 17 days of continuous advertisements on the channel to determine "racial presentation" (Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008, p. 57). Their results reflected another slight increase in characters of color, particularly Black characters who occupied 20% of commercials as opposed to white characters, who made up 70%. Findings also reflected the increased inclusion of more non-Black racial/ethnic minorities such as Asian-Americans; Latinx and Native-American visibility remained extremely limited. Inclusion does not equate prominence, however, and the content analysis indicated that the vast majority of lead roles -- nearly 93% -- belonged to white characters, whereas racial/ethnic minorities heavily populated supporting roles. Furthermore, the researchers found that a large portion of racial/ethnic portrayals exhibited stereotypes (34% of Black characters; 32% of Asian-American characters). For example, Black characters were disproportionately depicted as having athletic and entertainment-related skills in addition to a lack of nuclear family unit. Similarly, many commercials depicted Asian-Americans nearby or using a computer (Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder, 2008). Klein and Shiffman (2009) found similar results in their content analysis of underrepresentation in animated cartoons, illustrated by the following quote:

> All of these groups -- women, persons of color, older adults, gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals -- are devalued in our culture, and all are shown infrequently in animated cartoons. By ignoring, excluding, and marginalizing these groups...cartoons convey the message to viewers that these groups are unimportant to the society-at-large, or at best,

> that they are less important than their male, Caucasian, younger, and heterosexual counterparts. (p. 68)

Analyses by Bramlett-Solomon et al. (2008) and Klein et al. (2009) reflect the continuation of underrepresented minority groups, and problematic portrayals remain a threat to impressionable audiences. Additional content analyses are necessary to determine the progress made regarding non-stereotyped inclusion and representation in contemporary children's programming.

Contemporary Strides Toward Inclusion

White supremacy continues to permeate the U.S. and mainstream media to this day. Horrific injustices to minority communities have sparked public outrage, particularly from Black and Brown people who are constantly failed by institutions meant to serve them. Resurgence of public support for the Black Lives Matter movement and other activist organizations has ushered in an era defined by conscious reflection and actionable steps toward a more radical and equitable world. Prominent media companies have paid close attention to cries from consumers for more diverse stories and creators, and recent hiring processes and content reflect strides toward inclusion (Dhugga, 2020). Dhugga references popular content that has emerged in recent years such as Disney's *Coco* (Anderson & Unkrich, 2017) and *Moana* (Shurer, Clements & Musker, 2016) to illustrate the highly anticipated inclusion of racial/ethnic minorities in lead roles. Though it's undoubtedly a positive change, more work remains in regard to diversifying the industry as a whole, especially behind the scenes (Dhugga, 2020).

Perhaps the most successful instance of inclusion both behind and in front of the scenes is PBSKids and WGBH's co-production *Molly of Denali* (Gillim & Olufemi, 2019-present). The children's television series is the first to feature an Indigenous lead in the industry's history

(Rockett, 2019), and follows Alaskan Native youngster Molly Mabray as she embarks upon adventures that are simultaneously culturally specific and universally relatable. The production team sourced consultations from Alaskan Native elders and creatives, and employed several Alaskan-Native writers through a six-week script writing fellowship (Rockett, 2019). The final product has received critical acclaim, including the 2020 Peabody Award, for its beautifully crafted, authentic storylines and conscious portrayal of Native Alaskan culture (Crouse, 2020).

Large media corporations are implementing similar fellowships to facilitate the pipeline of creators of color into the industry. Netflix recently commenced a Latinx Inclusion Fellowship in which the studio awards five Latinx-identifying creatives with a $20,000 short-film production grant, professional mentorship and various networking opportunities (Gardner, 2020). Comparably, Sesame Workshop's Writers' Room Fellowship engages selected creative writers in an intensive six-week program wherein writers receive pitch mentorship, networking opportunities with industry executives, and for one writer, the promise of a development deal (Emery, 2017). Programs like these play a vital role in increasing the presence of diverse creatives in an industry that is otherwise arguably difficult to infiltrate.

The recent promotion of diverse industry executives is also an indication of increased inclusion (Thorne, 2020; Goldberg, 2020; Pedersen, 2020). Many newly promoted executives have established backgrounds in diversity and inclusion initiatives, and they themselves bring a diverse perspective to the creative process (Pendersen, 2020). More Black and Brown creatives occupy positions of leadership at renowned children's media companies than ever before, and the shift suggests several positive implications for historically underrepresented and marginalized groups whose calls are finally being heard.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodological approach consisted of two main parts: a written portion and production of a documentary film. To commence the former, researchers first brainstormed a list of questions with which to interview subjects. Some questions were unspecific in regard to the role of the interview subject within the children's media industry, while others were more targeted. Targeted questions were tailored toward job titles, including but not limited to production, writing, outreach, etc. Interview subjects who worked on *Molly of Denali* (2019 -) in particular received slightly different questions that pertain specifically to the show (see Appendix A). Opening questions were coined as "50,000 ft" questions wherein researchers inquired interview subjects about their stance and personal relationship to inclusion and diversity in children's media. Afterwards, researchers posed targeted questions relative to the subject's job title. Each question posed to producers indicated a conscious, evolving relationship between media production and social activism. Given time constraints of each interview session, often every question could not be addressed. Moreover, researchers took certain liberties during interviews (e.g. asking follow-up questions, changing question order, etc.) according to their discretion in order to maintain the fluidity of the conversation.

Questions for producers were intended to highlight decisions made throughout the production process that reflect intentional inclusion and diversity practices. Researchers made the assumption that the production process is characterized by innumerable moving parts associated including audio, visuals, editing, etc. Operating under that assumption, researchers asked subjects whether choices made throughout that process served as tools to break down stereotypes and inform viewers. Production questions also delved into accessibility of the

content, casting and hiring practices, models of representation (i.e. tokenism, color-blind, mono-ethnic, non-human cultural inclusion, and deep dive).

Within the context of this study, tokenism can be defined as the inclusion of token minority characters amongst a predominately white cast. Color-blind representation relates to diverse cast with characters who lack authentic, meaningful identity expression (e.g. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* (1997)) . Mono-ethnic representation is defined by the inclusion of a culturally homogenous cast with few interactions with characters of an opposing race (e.g. *The Adventures of Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* (1972-85)). Non-human cultural inclusion relates to non-human characters who participate in robust appreciation of various cultural norms and practices (e.g. *Sesame Street* (1969-). Researchers coined deep-dive representation to indicate current media that reflects diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices. In other words, content that includes minority characters of varying backgrounds in authentic, meaningful ways (e.g. *Molly of Denali* (2019-). There were significantly more questions brainstormed for producers than for any other job title, a fact that may be due to the various complexities of production.

Interview questions tailored toward children's media writers focused mainly on relative authenticity and universality of storylines. Specifically, researchers asked writers whether their approach to storytelling indicated conscious strides toward inclusivity, and how they employed those strategies in a tangible and meaningful way. Questions for writers' were founded upon the assumption that scripts undergo change, and that each draft is a product of feedback from a manifold of creatives. Like production, the writing process incorporates multiple and often varying opinions, thus the final product is far from a singular effort. Researchers' inquiries

investigated whether the collaborative nature of media writing can serve as a tool for increased inclusion.

Interview subjects who work in digital and outreach work in the realm of product testing, marketing, and development of materials external to focal content such games, educational supplements, etc. Research questions for these titles related to tactics used to target and engage diverse demographics, as well as tailor products to the needs of particular communities, especially one that is being represented in the content. These materials are often designed for young viewers, therefore research questions explored the intersection of age-appropriateness and authenticity as it relates to creative content development. Digital and outreach questions were intended to examine the effects of product design on minority well-being.

Closing interview questions drew upon the project's relevance in contemporary conversations of inequity in the United States. Reinvigorated public support of the Black Lives Matter movement and other social justice organizing efforts has applied pressure onto the media industry to produce more inclusive content. Several changes have already occurred as a result, such as promoting executives of color and redistribution of roles to include more actors of color. Given this trend, researchers inquired of each interview subject their thoughts regarding implications of these widespread changes for the future of media, particularly long term plans to hire more creatives of color. See Appendix B for the complete list of content creator interview questions.

Researchers interviewed a total of 27 subjects. Following an initial brainstorm of prominent individuals within the children's media industry, researchers reached out via email to request subjects' participation. Researchers relied on personal and professional connections for the initial wave of interview subjects. Snowballing methodology was utilized in order to reach

interview subjects outside of researchers' affiliations. In other words, after each session with the initial interview subjects, researchers asked whether that individual had any suggestions as to who they should speak with next. This method allowed researchers to network with professionals outside of their immediate connections who had a shared interest and background in children's media inclusion and diversity.

Each interview was conducted either via Zoom or phone call. Most interviews were recorded if researchers received a signed release from the subject. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Because researchers knew -- to a certain extent -- many of the subjects, the interviews maintained an informal ambiance. This is important to consider given that researchers did not have time to ask every question related to the interview subject's position, likely because many responses had a tangential story component. Researchers succeeded in building a comfortable exchange between interviewer and subject by engaging conversationally rather than formally.

Researchers coded transcripts for shared themes throughout the interviews and identified transcript data that corresponded to the following categories: big ideas, documentary sound bites, and recurring themes. Each category was implemented during the documentary construction in order to develop the storyline. In peer interview transcripts, researchers identified several big ideas which informed the structure of the film. Among these are the notion of exclusion in previously consumed children's media, reflections on authenticity, and emotional exploration into the effects of media consumption. Researchers selected non-white peer interview subjects to represent marginalized perspectives so that they may elucidate harmful effects of exclusion in mainstream media. Questions for peer interview subjects (see Appendix C) were formulated to gather anecdotal evidence of childhood media consumption and their reaction to messages

therein, with specific regard to authenticity and exclusion. Peer stories form the basis upon which viewers may conceptualize representation prior to conscious, widespread DEI efforts. Conversely, content creator transcripts indicate industry-wide efforts to increase inclusion both on and off screen in addition to current programming that implements them. Researchers incorporated content creator interview footage as a tool in establishing a shared consciousness amongst creators regarding diverse representation in children's media.

Following transcript coding, researchers organized video clips that correspond with transcript timestamps onto the documentary timeline. Once assembled, a story emerged that highlights both the harmful histories of exclusion in children's media and the promising future of DEI-informed content. The film comprises six distinct parts: representation, inclusion, what if, authenticity, deep dive representation: *Molly of Denali* (2019), and looking forward. Each chapter precedes an amalgamation of relevant soundbites from subjects' interview transcripts. Researchers compiled numerous video clips of both past and current children's media content to reinforce interview soundbites. Some interviews were included several times throughout the documentary, whereas others were not used at all. This is due to the long duration of each interview (approx. 20-30 minutes) and the relatively limited film run time. Clips included in the final documentary cut reflect the best audio/visual quality in addition to relevancy among all recorded interviews. Finally, researchers implemented various editing techniques in order to imbue the documentary with a visually pleasing, stylized tone and structure.

Chapter 4: Discussion & Conclusion

At the outset of this project, one could never have anticipated a global pandemic to disrupt every aspect of human life. The initial proposal included in-person interviews with subjects residing in Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles. Because many of the companies researchers planned to interview maintained headquarters in the preceding cities (e.g. Sesame Workshop, GBH, FableVision, etc.), it was necessary to limit the pool of possible interview subjects due to finite resources. The majority of interviews were conducted during the 2020 Summer Scholars Program, wherein selected fellows may fund travel expenses and allocate time to specified projects.

The prospect of virtual interviews never seemed viable; researchers planned to film each interview with filmmaking equipment to imbue the otherwise research-heavy project with a stylized tone. Once the Summer Scholars Program announced its plan to conduct everything virtually, it soon became clear that the project would differ vastly from its original proposal. Though this difference at first appeared negative, the virtual environment quickly transformed into an immense opportunity. Not only were researchers able to connect with interview subjects residing in eight different states, but the general increase in workplace flexibility enabled our access to a wide range of children's media executives who normally might've lacked the time to formally meet. As a result, our pool of interview subjects was made richer given the pandemic-imposed circumstances. Given this larger sample size, both the content and application of research findings increased in quality. Researchers were granted more insights into representation in children's media from perspectives ranging from entry-level to senior, small-scale production to large, etc.

Yet another unpredicted circumstance was the era of racial reckoning that would follow George Floyd's murder by Baltimore Police in May 2020. Protests erupted across the United States for a justice that has been withheld from people of color -- and Black ones, specifically -- throughout longstanding racial and ethnic divides. As a result, conversations on DEI did not begin with interviews conducted within this study. Perspectives exhibited by content creators and peers alike reflected an increased consciousness of current racial tensions and an awareness of how it has influenced dialogues on representation in social, political and professional spheres. Public pressure to transform systems that perpetuate inequality generated widespread changes throughout the professional realm, and the media industry in particular. Almost one year later, media giants are maintaining their commitment to increased DEI practices in order to promote media that is accessible and representative of everyone watching. This commitment has manifested in several ways including but not limited to the promotion of POC to senior/executive roles, increased visibility of underrepresented identities, pipeline hiring practices to attract more creatives of color, etc.

Each initiative is strong in theory, but intentional implementation is the only way to engender lasting change. Ensuring that companies see their DEI commitments through requires stringent guidelines for content creation that cannot be skimmed or skipped. In other words, it's not enough to simply change the race/ethnicity of characters to meet diversity quotas, rather that inclusion should be at the forefront of creators' minds during development. DEI should not be part of the conversation -- it *is* the conversation; it can't be a trend or last minute add-on. Widespread change to DEI practices within the children's media industry requires a complete rewiring of methodology relating to production both on and off the screen from hiring to production processes. These changes may carry significant weight in regard to the quantity of

positive representations available to viewers, but the quality remains a point of concern. Moreover, implementation of DEI initiatives must include practices both on and offscreen. It is not enough to approach representation as checking off boxes. Rather, that representation should be informed by creatives who share the experiences included onscreen.

Reinvigorated commitment to DEI initiatives throughout the children's media industry reinforces the notion of representation as a political issue in addition to a social one. In other words, the fervor with which audiences have demanded increased inclusion correlates with the public's general discontent with the 2020 presidential administration. The exclusive and derogatory nature of the 45th U.S. president's "Make America Great Again" campaign prompted a necessary response from the public, one that promoted belonging and celebrated difference. Thus, the topic of representation has transcended the screen; it reflects the dominant discourse on who we are as an American society and who we *want* to be. However, politics and public discourse are ever-changing. The pressure that audiences have applied to content creators won't last forever, but it is imperative that companies not only maintain, but propel that progress.

Many limitations of the study can be ascribed to the lack of diverse interview subjects. Researchers relied on longstanding personal connections and relationships with peer and content creator subjects. Historically, the children's media industry is dominated by white women, thus that demographic was represented most in the interview subject pool. As a result, findings disproportionately reflect that perspective. Moreover, researchers were unable to conduct more than a handful of peer interviews due to time constraints. More peer perspectives would have highlighted findings related to the consequences of pre-DEI media. In the same vein, another limitation is the small sample of content creators. Though virtual environments allowed

researchers to interview more individuals, the study only reflects the thoughts of a portion of individuals on DEI.

There are several implications for possible long-term effects of this study regarding the socio-emotional development of children who did not grow up in a DEI-conscious world. Both this study and existing research reinforces the notion of media as an immense influence on adolescent well-being. Negative portrayals and stereotypes of marginalized groups leave lasting impacts on the ways adolescents perceive others and themselves, thus potential effects of said media can prove devastating to the adolescent psyche. Though the media industry today is more conscious of these effects, the majority of individuals creating content today are still predominantly white. Given this fact, it is important to critique whether increased visibility of underrepresented groups translates to authentic, positive representation.

Several questions are not addressed in this study. The only way to explore possible positive effects of media representation on adolescent development is to continuously present diverse, authentic role models for children to emulate. It is important that they see characters who look like themselves navigate life in a meaningful way, and to see that everyone has a place where they belong.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interview Questions for *Molly of Denali* Content Creators

Producers

1. How did the concept come about in the first place?
2. How did you go about finding Alaskan partners, and why was this such a critical part of the endeavor?
3. Why was it critical to voice the characters authentically?
4. In light of recent actions taken by white actors to step down from POC roles, would you change anything about the casting process if you had the chance?
5. The opening of the show has kids being kids, and there are scenes that are also Alaska specific. Some of them go against stereotype, like showing fields of flowers instead of fields of snow. How were the music and images for the open decided, and what kinds of decisions went into how to edit them?
6. Not everyone in Alaska has access to PBS; how are you making sure that "Molly" gets to communities that don't have access?
7. Does the show's focus on educational technology need to be in some ways universally construed? How do we know that kids coming from different backgrounds "read" things like maps the same way, or are there efforts in how this gets discussed/drawn to make it culturally specific?
8. Do you feel any pressure to address intersectionality politics in the show, particularly given the current plight of indigenous individuals in the United States, and how they've been unfairly treated since colonization began?
9. How do you address policy setbacks (e.g. social, environmental, etc.) caused by the Trump administration while remaining as 'neutral' as possible (as PBS is a bipartisan non-profit)?

Writers

1. Writers: how you balancing the storylines so that there are elements that speak to Alaska Native people, other Indigenous people and non-Native people?
2. Can you give an example of a storyline that changed because of input from the team in Alaska?
3. Why was it critical to have a workshop for writers in Alaska?
4. Trini is a young Black girl from the continental U.S.; does the Molly team feel pressure to address recent BLM protests/race politics there? Or in Alaska?
5. How does writing for a Black character in Alaska compare to writing for one who lives in the continental U.S.?
6. Trini represents children that may not know much about Alaskan culture, and hold incorrect preconceptions of Indigenous life. What is the best way (if any) to approach writing about that exchange while remaining respectful and also entertaining?

Outreach

1. What are the metrics of success for this show?
2. How is the show being marketed? Are there differences between how it is marketed in different parts of the US?
3. What kinds of materials are being developed for parents? For educators?

Digital

1. Digital games have all been tested in Boston. Any plans to test with kids in Alaska?
2. The partnership with 5 PBS stations that serve rural communities: what have been some of the main take-aways that have influenced the development of peripheral materials?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Content Creators

All content creators

Beginning of interview:

1. To what extent do you believe issues of diversity and inclusion are important today in the creation of children's media?
2. What does diverse/inclusive media mean to you?

End of interview:

1. We seem to be in a moment here in which a number of high profile white actors have been very publicly stating that they will no longer voice characters of color. What do you think are the implications of this for children's animated programming?
2. What do you think needs to happen in the media industries for systemic change to happen? Is it enough to have entry programs for underrepresented peoples, as many organizations do? What kinds of supports need to be put in place so that these entry level people get to places in which they have more of a voice in the creation and shaping of media content?

Producers

1. How would you describe the process of creating a show with an underrepresented protagonist? Can you walk us through what happens, from the inception of an idea to the point at which a show goes into production?
2. To what extent do you utilize consultants in introducing a new character who comes from a particular or identifiable background, or introducing a theme having to do with ethnicity/race/gender or diversity in some other form, or developing a new show about

any of these areas? Does that process involve a partnership with relevant communities? If so, what does that look like?

3. What does authenticity in media mean to you?
4. How do you make choices do you make in the production process (e.g. music, visuals, editing) to break down stereotypes and inform viewers?
5. How do you make your content accessible to underprivileged communities?
6. How do you make issues specific to a given community universal to all viewers?
7. To what extent do you feel that characters or storylines having to do with particular and identifiable ethnic/racial/gender or other backgrounds need to tap into universal human issues?
8. In the process of making issues universal, do you feel that certain concessions are made in terms of authenticity?
9. What considerations are at play in the process of putting together a crew for a show about underrepresented communities?
    a. If one consideration is a shared cultural background, why is it important to include these members?
10. What considerations are at play when casting a character?
11. Is it important for a character to be acted/voiced by someone with a shared cultural background? If so, why?
12. How do you code non-human characters so that viewers understand they are meant to represent a given community (e.g. Segi from *Sesame Street*) in terms of color, accent, etc.?
    a. How do you ensure this process does not result in a stereotypical portrayal?
13. In our research, we've found several different models of representation (i.e. cultural artifacts vs token characters vs colorblind rep vs mismatched representation) that have been used in the past in children's media. Given where we are today in 2020, do you feel that there is a particular model that is better than others?
14. Do targeted audiences affect chosen models of representation? In other words, if a show is targeted towards a certain demographic (e.g. Black, Latinx), would you be more likely to use token representation, cultural artifacts, etc. to better serve your message?

<u>Writers</u>

1. How do you develop storylines that are both culturally specific and universally relevant?
2. What kind of changes does the script undergo throughout the production process?
3. If you are partnered with a team from a given underrepresented community, do their edits carry a heavier weight than that of someone who is not from that cultural background?
4. When making inclusive media, do you find it critical to employ a writers workshop with individuals who share the same background as characters in the show?
5. What steps do you take to ensure authentic characters if they are written by someone who does not share their cultural background?

Outreach

1. How do you measure the success of your show?
2. How do you market the show?
3. To what extent do you look at the demographics of who is watching your show?
4. Do you employ marketing strategies that are specific to a given community (e.g. domestic and abroad)? If so, what does that look like?
5. Are there any particular materials marketed towards children and parents? If so, are there any deviations in products dependent on the targeted community?

Digital

1. Do you conduct testing for digital products? If so, what communities do you target?
2. How do you measure the success of your digital products?
3. To what extent do you look at the demographics of who is using your digital products?
4. What cultural takeaways (in the production process) have influenced the development of digital materials?

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Peer Interview Subjects:

1. What kind of content did you consume growing up?
2. Who were your media role models growing up? Did they look like you?
3. Was there a lack of representation in your content consumption?
4. When was the first time you felt positively represented?
5. How did this lack of representation make you feel?

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