

Offensive Ethnic Clichés in Movies: Drugs, Sex, and Servility

By

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Abstract

A demographically diverse sample of 1,226 respondents indicated what, in Hollywood films, they found ethnically/racially offensive to their own group. Offenses were codified into 36 separate categories and then collapsed into 10 themes. Results indicate that about half of the sample took offense at films. Sensitivity to particular offenses varied as a function of race/ethnicity of the perceiver with African Americans taking the most offense and Whites taking the least. What a viewer finds particularly offensive varies as a function of race or ethnicity. Hispanics and African Americans were offended by portrayals of them as criminal or intellectually inept. Asians were offended by humor mocking their English, their invisibility in film, and the casting of actors from one Asian culture to portray Asians from another.

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Reams of newsprint, hours of airtime, and days of professional conference papers and panels have been devoted to the argument that incessant, negative, one-dimensional portrayals of minority groups in the entertainment media not only affects how minorities think of themselves but also how such images contribute to the formation or reinforcement of negative, minority group stereotypes in the minds of majority groups. This concern is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), which asserts that people are distinguished as members of social groups and seek a positive social identity through comparisons between their own and other groups. Feedback from other social groups (ethnic, religious, etc.) strongly impacts on a group's social identity and how individual members perceive themselves in the social pecking order.

Media scholars such as Wilson II & Gutierrez (1995) and psychologists, such as Kenneth Gergen (1985), turned an eye toward the media and theorized that how minorities are portrayed in the various mass media inflicts what Gergen terms “dignitary harm,” by virtue of the use of demeaning stereotypes, repetitive, and unrepresentative images which help, in part, to shape minority group social identities.

The mass media might be further worthy of concern to minority communities given what's been called the “out-group homogeneity effect” (Mullen & Hu, 1989), which describes how out-group minority members are not only seen as being different from the in-group majority but also as more similar to each other (i.e., “they're all the same”). A potential and undesirable ramification of a negative portrayal of a minority member in the mass media, then, would be that it has a greater spread of effect, such as generalizing or hardening negative stereotypes, than would be the case for a majority group member so portrayed (Jones, 1997).

Allport (1954), added to the lexicon of detrimental social forces on out-group minorities when he asserted that minorities become psychologically predisposed to being sensitized to negative media portrayals and tend to cultivate what he calls a “collective conscience” (constant concern that how a member of one's group behaves might reflect on the group as a whole), as well as an abiding sense of

“representative status” (being seen not as an individual, but incessantly as a representative of a group). Allport’s predictions are supported by research by Dawson (1994) and Davis and Gandy (1999), which provides evidence that African Americans tend to believe that how they are depicted in the media negatively affects their personal lives and what people stereotypically expect of and from them. Indeed, according to research by Keith Harrison (1998), media portrayals influence how African American youth decide what careers to pursue -- and not pursue -- and how these youths, and the public at large, come to regard such controversial matters as the sexual appetite and prowess of African American athletes.

Anecdotal support for arguments regarding the impact of media images on a group’s self image can be found in numerous essays on the subject (Kim, 1991; Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Yang & Ragaza, 1994). For instance, Yang and Ragaza (1994) and Mok (1998) argue that the minority female’s view of herself and her physical attractiveness is negatively affected when confronted by the plethora of European American models and movie actresses who set the standards for what is attractive and what is not. Mok, however, is careful to point out that there has yet to be established an empirical link between media stereotypes and the views Asian American women have of themselves while, in an empirical study Milkie (1999), found that African American teenage girls were not affected by nor do they identify with White images of beauty pervading the mass media. Interestingly, Stoman (1986) found that TV images has a negative influence on the young African American female self concept but not on that of the young African American male.

While those who predict and decry the negative impact of media portrayals of minority groups often speak in one voice, results of actual research into minority reaction to mass entertainment media portrayals is, as Milkie’s (1999) results suggest, more of a mixed bag. Among non-European Americans, research has shown that certain minority groups are more sensitive to ethnic slurs to their own group than are other minority groups (Allen, 1990). Many minority groups certainly do want more exposure on television and in film (Gerbner, 1998). But there are and were exceptions. Historical analysis of early Hollywood revealed that Jews, although they controlled Hollywood, were reluctant to see themselves portrayed on the screen for fear of it inciting anti-Semitism (Gabler, 1988). Still other research indicates

that some minorities have greater preferences for and are more comfortable with viewing themselves through the eyes of their own ethnic group rather than through those of another ethnic group. Fischhoff, Lewis, & Antonio (1997) found that African Americans exhibited a proportionately greater preference for ethnic-congruent films (films which, in the case of African Americans, are written and/or directed and/or star African Americans) than European, Asian- or even Hispanic Americans. Still other writers have anecdotally argued that negative screen images contribute to creating or maintaining inter-ethnic prejudice (e.g., Appleford, 1995; Bogle, 1973; Bourne, St. Clair, 1990; Bruno, 1991; El-Farra, 1996; Hadley-Garcia, 1993; Ono, 1998; Spigner, 1994). But empirical evidence is lacking concerning exactly how minority group members in the United States evaluate how they are portrayed in films or why such portrayals are offensive to them.

While a minority group's status may lead to sensitivity to how their group is portrayed in the media, what of the majority group? In terms of portrayals in the entertainment media, for example, European Americans may not register outrage if they see another European American presented in an unflattering light on the news or in the entertainment media. Why? Perhaps because there is no palpable ethnic (as contrasted with religious, regional, or cultural) consequence of such an unflattering portrayal. European Americans are the majority and therefore hold the political and economic reins of power in society. Moreover, European Americans are so pervasively represented in films and in such a variety of roles that it would be difficult to argue "unrepresentativeness" when they are portrayed negatively in any instance.

If these assumptions about European Americans have merit, it might be expected, then, that European Americans would be less sensitive to how they are portrayed in film than would ethnic minority groups. And given the aforementioned material on African American sensibilities regarding media portrayals, it may be expected also that, aggregately, African Americans would show greater sensitivity to arguably or blatantly negative portrayals of themselves on the screen than might other minority groups and, certainly, greater than that displayed by respondents of the European American majority group.

The present study intended to fill an important empirical gap in ethnic minority concerns over offenses in filmic portrayals and explored the following research hypotheses and questions.

H₁: Groups will differ with regard to proportion of respondents in each ethnic group who have found portrayals of themselves in movies to be ethnically offensive.

H₂: African Americans will be the most sensitive to ethnic offenses while European Americans will be the least.

R₁: Are some specific movies more likely to generate offenses than others?

R₂: Do ethnic groups differ in terms of the specific movies they find generating offensive portrayals?

R₃: Do ethnic groups differ in terms of the sorts of offenses to which they are most sensitive?

Methodology

Sample Population

An independent, cross-sectional, convenience sample (Vadum & Rankin, 1998) of 1,226 people comprised the respondent population and ranged in ages from 13-74. Respondents were solicited from university campuses and non-university populations contacted by mail. Since most research on film effects and film preferences have been done on college-age students (Austin, 1989; Fischhoff, 1994), it was felt that getting a broader age representation of the film-going population would provide a better data base from which to draw inferences about the general film-going population. Previous research (Faber, Hardy, & O'Guinn, 1990; Fischhoff, Antonio and Lewis, 1997) has suggested that between the two demographic variables, age, rather than education, is often the more important variable when it comes to audience reactions to films. The three operationally defined movie-going generations employed in this study were: "Younger" (under age 26); "Middle"(ages 26-49) and; "Older" (ages 50 and above). Previous research (Fischhoff, 1994; Fischhoff, et al, 1997) found that when partitioning the age continuum into three ranges, these range cutoffs were optimal for articulating the differences in filmgoer response patterns found to emerge as a function of age.

Respondents in the Younger group were readily available from college student populations and their non-student friends. However, to fill in the age deficits found in the student population and to avoid a sample population that is too educationally restrictive, a selection was made from lists of civic and private organizations throughout the country that were likely to have substantial memberships comprised of people above the age of 30 (e.g., church, business and hobby groups). Some of these organizations and/or their members were known personally by various members of the research team. Others were gleaned from listings in the AARP magazine Modern Maturity. These organizations were contacted in order to secure a larger segment of the population that fell into the Older age group. Approximately 500 surveys were sent out to organizations such as those described above, in packets of 50 with postage paid return envelopes included. A total of 256 surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 51%. Younger respondents were solicited from schools in southern California and from several mid-west and northeast universities¹. Surveys from educational institutions other than Cal State, Los Angeles, were returned by mail to the first author in assembled packets.

Survey Instrument and Offense Coding

Respondents were asked a series of demographic questions that included age, ethnic identification, and gender. Ethnic identity was an open-ended question rather than a pre-determined categorical one to give respondents the comfort of self-description especially given the extant controversy about racial or ethnic distinctions and designations (Phinney, 1996). Respondents were also asked how often they saw movies per month, either in theaters or on television through the venues of broadcast, cable, pay per view or videocassettes. They were then asked to recall any movies they had seen which offended² them in terms of the portrayal of their own ethnic group and to cite the specific offenses. Respondents were given the option of citing up to five offensive movies and up to five offenses taken for each movie. No lists of possible offenses or of particular films were offered as it was felt this might bias or “lead” responses.

After the data was collected and based on observed response trends, a round of discussions among researchers yielded a final codification of offenses consisting of 36 separate classes or categories.

Classes of offenses included such matters as: endless depictions of particular minority groups as criminals or gang members or terrorists; portraying minorities as sexually obsessed; repetitive relegation of minorities to servile, unskilled occupations; absence of minorities on screen or in storyline; not differentiating between the diversity of cultures and sub-cultures (between, e.g., the diversity of Hispanic- or Asian American populations); or depicting minorities as unintelligent or ignorant. These individual classes of offenses are presented on Table 1.

Table 1
Codification of Cited Offenses Taken at Film Portrayals

Code #	Meaning/Referents
1	language (any negative connotation)
2	employment stereotypes
3	sexually loose or promiscuous
4	overpopulation or excessive reproduction
5	low intelligence/skills, primitivity, warlike
6	criminality/violence
7	poor hygiene/unkept physical appearance
8	poverty/welfare prone
9	low ambition/lazy/undependable
10	athletic stereotypes
11	vulgar language
12	gangs
13	excessive use of drugs or alcohol
14	unflattering gender stereotypes
15	angry demeanor/ hostile/unfriendly/humorless
16	martial arts stereotype
17	greedy/cheap/selfish
18	exploitable/expendable/helpless minorities
19	White racial superiority complex/bigots/against interracial romance
20	superstitious/overly religious
21	on-screen invisibility, especially in featured roles
22	servility/passivity vis a vis Whites
23	illegal aliens/conniving for citizenship
24	clannish/ethnic in-grouping
25	strange/undesirable customs/activities/orientations
26	non-ethnic actors used in ethnic roles
27	historical or contemporary mischaracterizations
28	ethnic betrayal

29	ethnic wannabes
30	racist humor
31	negative portrayal of physical expressions (walking, posture, etc.)
32	clothes/dress style
33	biased White interpretation of minority experience
34	identifying all Hispanics as Mexican
35	repetitive, unrepresentative, demeaning stereotypes
36	all other slurs against racial minorities

These 36 categories of offense were then collapsed into 10 offense themes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Offense Code Categories Collapsed in Themes

	Theme labels	Included offense categories
Theme 1.	Anti-social, criminal, violent	6, 12, 13
Theme 2.	Deficiencies in motivation, language, or intellectual skills	1, 5, 8, 9
Theme 3.	Racial superiority/bigotry/exploitation.	19
Theme 4.	Culture and behavior held up to ridicule	4, 14, 20, 25, 30, 32
Theme 5.	Passive, helpless, easily exploited minorities	18, 22
Theme 6.	Historical or contemporary mischaracterizations	27, 33, 34
Theme 7.	Absent from or ethnically undifferentiated on screen	21, 26
Theme 8.	Vulgar language/behavior	7, 11, 15, 31
Theme 9.	Behavioral or occupational stereotypes.	2, 10, 16, 23, 36
Theme 10.	Sexually loose or promiscuous	3
	Other miscellaneous offenses	17, 34

Results

Because of the paucity of respondents from five of the nine ethnic demographic groups surveyed (Native Americans, recent immigrants from Eastern European countries [e.g., Armenians, Russians], Arab-Muslims, East Indians/Pakistanis, and people who classified themselves of mixed backgrounds), the bulk of data presented, except where otherwise noted as “all respondents,” will concentrate on responses from the four major ethnic groups: European-, African-, Hispanic-, and Asian Americans. Respondents from the diverse cultures of Asia as well as Mexico, Central and South America, were initially scrutinized

separately. However, analyses of the responses patterns indicated that the offenses cited by respondents from these diverse Hispanic- or Asian American cultures were of sufficient similarity to justify their being collapsed into the two major demographic classifications of Hispanic- and Asian Americans.

All Respondents

Offended vs. Unoffended Proportions

Of the 1,226 respondents who participated in the survey, 579 (47%) indicated that there were no movies to which they particularly took offense (“unoffended”). Interestingly, offended and unoffended respondents did not differ in terms of frequency of monthly movie attendance. For those offended the average was 5.50 (n = 635) as compared with a average of 5.29 (n = 514) for the unoffended. These differences were not statistically significant, $t(1147) = 0.68$, ns. Other factors obviously account for why some people are offended and others are not.

Gender

There was no significant difference between males and females in terms of likelihood of taking offense at movie portrayals of their ethnic groups. For males, 57% (n = 256) took offense while for females, 55% (n = 427) took offense, $\chi^2(1, N = 685) = .76$, ns.

Ethnicity

Thirty-eight percent of European Americans were offended as contrasted with 48% for Asian Americans, 58% for Hispanic Americans, and 70% for African Americans. Overall differences between the four principal ethnic groups in terms of the proportion of those offended (see Table 3) were significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 1,134) = 45.72$, $p < .001$. This supported Research Hypothesis 1 which predicted significant differences between the ethnic groups in terms of likelihood of taking offense.

Table 3

Chi-Square Analyses of Differences Between Principal Ethnic Groups in Terms of Number of Respondents Who Took Offense and Mean Offense Citation Rate

Number offended	Number not offended	χ^2	<u>df</u>	<u>p</u>
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Overall	647	579	45.72	3	< .001
Euro- v African-American	104 v 99	167 v 43	37.68	1	< .001
Euro- v Hispanic-American	104 v 271	167 v 200	25.26	1	< .001
Euro- v Asian-American	104 v 119	167 v 131	4.52	1	< .05
African- v Hispanic-Americans	99 v 271	43 v 200	6.76	1	< .01
African- v Asian-American	99 v 119	43 v 131	17.94	1	< .001
Hispanic- v Asian-American	271 v 119	200 v 131	6.51	1	< .025

	Mean number of offenses cited	F =	df	p
Overall F-Statistic		9.05	3, 644	< .001
Tukey <u>a</u>				
Euro- v African-American	2.68 v 4.34			< .001
Euro- v Hispanic-American	2.68 v 4.11			< .001
Euro- v Asian-American	2.68 v 3.30			ns
African- v Hispanic-Americans	4.34 v 4.11			ns
African- v Asian-American	4.34 v 3.30			< .07
Hispanic- v Asian-American	4.11 v 3.30			< .09

As Table 3 shows, and as predicted in Hypothesis 2, European Americans were the least likely to be offended by their portrayal in Hollywood films while African Americans were the most likely to take offense at such portrayals. All of the four primary ethnic groups differed from each other at statistically significant levels, in terms of ratio of offense taken to no offense taken, with European Americans taking the least offense and African Americans taking the most.

The fact that 22% of the respondent population was European American and fully 62% of European Americans were found in this unoffended population, no doubt strongly contributed to that 47% of respondents who reported taking no offense. Nonetheless, European Americans account for only 167 of the approximately 579 unoffended respondents. Clearly minorities made substantial contributions to this figure.

Age

Of the 1226 total respondents in the survey, 1,188 gave their ages. Results indicated that there was an overall significant difference between people in the three major age group categories (Young: < 26 years, $n = 768$; Middle: 26-49 years, $n = 387$; and Older: 50+, $n = 33$ [declined to state, $n = 38$]) in terms of proportion of respondents in each age group who did or did not find films ethnically offensive, $\chi^2 (2, N = 1,188) = 12.20, p < .01$. Closer inspection, however, reveals the difference to reside largely between those in the older category (30% vs. 70% for offended vs. unoffended, respectively) as compared with those in the Young (54% vs. 46%) and Middle (59% vs. 41%). For these two age groups the differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,183) = 2.22, ns$. Older respondents, then, were less likely to take offense at film portrayals than those in younger age categories.

This effect of age on tendency to be offended by films, however, may have resulted more from the impact of ethnicity than from the impact of age. A total of 62% of Whites did not find anything racially offensive in films. Inspection of the ethnicities of those in the Older age group reveals that 61% are Whites (20 out of a total of 33). A wider representiveness of other ethnicities in the Older age category would be necessary to discern whether there is a clear age effect for being offended by films.

It is possible, of course, that whether or not offense was taken is related to the fact that older people see fewer movies than younger people, at least in movie theaters (Dortch, 1996), but probably also in rentals. Indeed, when we consider only respondents below the age of 50, as too few people (nine) aged 50 and above were in the sample of those who were offended by movies, we find that young respondents do see significantly more movies ($M = 5.72$ per month) than Middle Age people ($M = 4.34$), $t = 3.06, df = 630, p < .001$. However, in terms of the variable of whether or not one has been offended by films, there is still no difference between Young and Middle age groups $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,155) = .43, ns$. Consequently it may be that since younger people see more movies than older people and thus have a greater chance of being offended, it is frequency of movie attendance rather than age per se that is the best predictor of offense sensitivity.

Top Five Most Frequently Cited Offense Themes - All Respondents

Table 4 shows the rank order of offense themes in terms of frequency of citation for all respondents. Clearly, Theme 1, dealing with portrayals as anti-social, criminal or violent, receives the most endorsement (26%) as a portrayal offense. This theme variously embraced such screen characterizations as gang members, engaging in violence, pursuing criminal activities, and either dealing in or using illicit drugs. Interestingly, every ethnic group looked at in the present study cited this as a major offending theme.

Table 4
Rank Ordering Of Frequency of Citation of Offense Themes

Offense Theme	Total Responses	% of All Offense Themes Cited
Theme 1 Anti-Social, criminal, violent	539	26
Theme 2 Deficiencies in motivation, language, or intellectual skills	398	19
Theme 9 Behavioral and occupational stereotypes	264	13
Theme 10 Sexually loose or promiscuous	179	9
Theme 6 Historical or contemporary mischaracterizations	163	8
Theme 4 Culture and behavior held up to ridicule	152	7
Theme 3 White racial superiority/bigotry/exploitation	97	5
Theme 8 Vulgar minorities	97	5
Theme 7 Absent from or ethnically undifferentiated on screen	94	4.5
Theme 5 Passive, helpless, easily exploited minorities	87	4
Other, miscellaneous offenses	34	2
Total Offenses Cited	2104	

Theme 2, which covered offenses concerning portrayals of groups as intellectually, behaviorally or emotionally primitive, poverty- or welfare-prone, or being English-language impaired, received the second most frequent citation (19%). Once again, virtually every ethnic group examined in this study cited this as a major offending theme.

Theme 9, which concerned such matters as employment, athletic, martial arts, and illegal alien stereotypes was the third most frequently mentioned set of offenses (13%). The only major ethnic group which did not have this theme in its top five offense themes was African Americans.

Theme 10, concerning promiscuous or loose sexual habits was the fourth most frequently cited offense (9%). Only Asian Americans did not provide enough citations to land it in their top five most frequently mentioned offense themes.

Theme 5, which addressed the issue of historical or contemporary mischaracterizations of peoples or their cultures was the fifth most frequently cited offense theme (8%).

Ethnic Breakdowns

Table 5 provides a demographic summary of the five most frequently cited offenses and the themes of which they are subsets. For the four primary ethnic groups, the top five offenses comprise over 70% of all cited offenses. The text printed in **bold** and larger font size under theme description in Table 5 indicate the most frequently occurring offense categories within that theme for a particular ethnic group. The reader may refer to Table 1 for the precise meaning of that offense code. Breakdowns according to ethnicity address Research Questions 1-3 which concerned what offenses groups are most sensitive to and what particular movies they single out as vehicles for specific offenses.

Table 5

Offense Summaries of Ethnic Groups

Ethnicity of those taking offense	Codes	Theme #	Theme description	Group's offense citation frequency	% of group's total cited offenses
European Americans	19	3	racial superiority/bigotry	41	20

(n = 104) Offense citations (n = 210)	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal , violent	33	16
	1, 5, 8, 9	2	deficiencies in motivation, language or intellectual skills	26	12
	2, 10, 16, 23, 36	9	behavioral or occupational stereotypes	26	12
	3	10	sexually loose or promiscuous	24	11
African Americans (n = 99) Offense citations (n = 363)	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal, violent	82	23
	1, 5, 8, 9	2	deficiencies in motivation , language or intellectual skills	63	17
	3	10	sexually loose or promiscuous	45	12
	18, 22	5	passive, exploitable , helpless minorities	35	10
Hispanic Americans (n = 271) Offense citations (n = 1040)	27, 33, 34	6	cultural/historical inaccuracies	32	9
	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal, violent	401	39
	1, 5, 8, 9	2	deficiencies in motivation, language or intellectual skills	200	19
	2, 10, 16, 23, 36	9	behavioral or occupational stereotypes	119	11
Asian Americans (n = 119) Offense citations (n = 257)	3	10	sexually loose or promiscuous	48	5
	18, 22	5	passive, exploitable , helpless minorities	29	3
	2, 10, 16, 23, 36	9	behavioral or occupational stereotypes	53	21
	1, 5, 8, 9	2	deficiencies in motivation, language or intellectual skills	51	20
	27, 33,	6	cultural/historical	31	12

	34		inaccuracies		
	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal , violent	26	10
	21, 26	7	non-ethnic casting	16	6
Native Americans (n = 27)	27, 33, 34	6	cultural/historical inaccuracies	27	27
Offense citations (n = 99)	26	7	non-ethnic casting	17	17
	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal, violent	10	10
	1, 5, 8	2	deficiencies in motivation , language or intellectual skills	9	9
Arab/Muslim (n = 12)	1, 5, 8, 9	2	deficient motivation or language or intellectual skills	8	20
Offense citations (n = 40)	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal , violent	8	20
Eastern Europeans (n = 10)	6, 12, 13	1	anti-social, criminal , violent	4	21
Offense citations (n = 19)	1, 5, 9	2	deficiencies in motivation, language or intellectual skills	3	16

European Americans

Films and Offenses

The film which was most frequently mentioned by European Americans as containing offensive portrayals was White Men Can't Jump (19 citations, 20% of all films cited) The issue of White athleticism (*vis a vis* African Americans) obviously struck a sensitive chord. But, the most frequently occurring class of offenses cited by European Americans fell into Theme 4 (racial superiority and bigotry), constituting 20% of all offenses. Movies which portrayed European Americans as criminally violent and/or bigoted or being overdrawn as the “bad race” in history, such as Mississippi Burning and Rosewood, illustrate this class of offense.

It is noteworthy that the four remaining offenses cited by European Americans (anti-social, criminal, violent; deficiencies in motivation, language or intellectual skills; behavioral or occupational stereotypes; and sexually loose or promiscuous) were also in the top five of cited offenses for other ethnic groups with the exception of Asian Americans.

Hispanic Americans

Films and Offenses

The criminally-themed drama, American Me (76 citations), two comedies connected with Cheech Marin and/or Cheech and Chong (Born in East L.A., and Up in Smoke - 58 citations) and the romantic comedy, Fools Rush In (65 citations), were the primary offense vehicles for Hispanic Americans. The dramas Mi Familia (44 citations) and Mi Vida Loca (40 citations) rounded out the top five offending movies. Although it is unlikely that the intention of Hispanic American filmmakers was to racially offend his/her audience, this study found, ironically, that it is the Hispanic American filmmaker who creates films which tallied as the most offensive to the Hispanic American audiences.

In terms of offenses, Hispanic Americans being portrayed as violent or criminals (Theme 1) was the most frequently occurring offense, constituting 39 % of all mentioned offenses. In startling contrast to the other ethnic groups, Hispanic Americans cited this anti-social offense theme more than twice as often as the next frequently cited theme. In fact, almost 4 offenses in 10 were the anti-social, criminal or violent characterizations of Hispanic Americans in film for Hispanic American respondents. These portrayals included gang members, criminals and/or drug users.

The anti-social, criminal and violent theme was followed in frequency by the deficiencies in motivation, language or intellectual skills theme (Theme 2), which comprised close to 20% of the offenses cited. This theme accounted for portrayals of Hispanic Americans as being uneducated, poor, and lazy. Again, unlike other groups in this study, the two most frequently cited offense themes (1 and 2) accounted for more than the majority (58%) of the offenses cited by Hispanic American respondents.

Occupational stereotypes (Theme 9), especially of Hispanic Americans being portrayed as maids or gardeners (e.g., Fools Rush In and As Good As It Gets) constituted the next most frequently occurring

offenses. Stereotypes of over-sexed and macho men (Desperado) and passive (Mi Familia) or loose women (Desperado) -- Themes 4 and 10 respectively -- were other particularly offensive screen stereotypes.

African Americans

Films and Offenses

The five films with the most frequent citations were: Boyz n' the Hood (14 citations); Booty Call (12 citations); The Players Club and Amistad (11 citations each) and Friday (8 citations). The distribution was fairly smooth and in single digits in the gradual decline in film frequency citations after these four films.

African Americans resented being portrayed as violent or criminal (Theme 1), and intellectually deficient (Theme 2). Films such as Boyz n' the Hood or New Jack City are thematically illustrative. Also strongly resented is the hyper-sexed image of African American men and women (Theme 10). Films such as Booty Call and The Player's Club call to mind such images. Theme 5 offenses, found in unrelenting portrayals of African Americans as being exploited or dependent on hand-outs or welfare, as in Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing, and being the object of racism, even in films designed to explore the cultural ravages of racism, as in Amistad and Rosewood, were also found to be off-putting.

Once again, as with Hispanic Americans, an unexpected result was that four of the five most offensive films were written, directed by and had leads who were African American.

Asian Americans

Films and Offenses

The films which engendered the most criticism from Asian Americans were, in order of citation frequency, the comedy Rush Hour (17 citations), followed by The Joy Luck Club (13 citations) and Mulan (11 citations). Rush Hour was found objectionable because of the stereotypes of Asian Americans as linguistically handicapped (Theme 1) and deployment of the martial arts stereotype (Theme 9). Offense taken at Mulan was primarily attributable to what Asian Americans felt were both historical inaccuracies and a lack of understanding of Asian culture (Theme 6).

Films which portray Asian Americans as linguistically handicapped (Theme 2), e.g., Booty Call, as cruel or primitive (Theme 5), e.g., Red Corner, as worker drones, exploiting the African American ghettos (Themes 3 and 9), e.g., Do The Right Thing, or as cliché martial arts masters (Theme 9), e.g., James Bond, Bruce Lee, and Jackie Chan movies, or offering unflattering gender stereotypes or contemporary mischaracterizations (Theme 6) e.g., The Joy Luck Club, were also found offensive. Of particular annoyance to Asian Americans is the pervasive invisibility of Asian Americans in so many American movies, the casting of non-Asian Americans in Asian American roles, or racial generalization where a Chinese actor is cast in the role of a character designated as Korean or Japanese (Theme 7).

Discussion

Results indicate that certain portrayals of ethnic groups are perceived as offensive to a little over half of the respondent population. But almost as many others found little offensive in films. Beyond the factor of age, which was regrettably confounded by ethnicity, no other data was available which would account for the reasons for these differences beyond the fact that Whites were the least likely group to take offense. But, it must be recalled, a substantial number of minority respondents also reported being unoffended. It may be that the unoffended simply have a different take on what can be expected from movies. Many of these unoffended wrote comments such as, “Why take offense when it’s only a movie” or “Nothing really offends me.”

This minority reaction can be interpreted in at least one of two ways: either movies are simply given artistic license by some minority members in the audience and/or such allegedly offensive portrayals, although often exaggerated, may nonetheless reflect this audience’s in-group perceptions as well; alternatively, it may be that, as many vocal critics of such portrayals have argued (e.g., Wilson II & Gutierrez, 1995), some minority film viewers may view such film portrayals too benignly. “Too benignly” may be interpreted to mean that minority viewers don’t see or appreciate the social consequences of such portrayals to minority groups in terms of stereotype creation or reinforcement in the minds of majority or other minority group members; nor do they see the consequences for minority group members’ individual and collective ethnic self-concept.

For those who were offended, offense varied as a function of ethnicity of the perceiver with African Americans taking the most offense and European Americans taking the least. Hispanic Americans fell closer to African Americans and Asian Americans closer to European Americans in terms of frequency of offense taken.

In terms of research questions posed earlier, results clearly indicate that for each ethnic group, certain films stand out as containing the most offensive portrayals. Furthermore, while there are overlaps across groups as to general classes of offenses, groups also differ as to particular classes of offense to which they are sensitive or to offenses to which they are frequently exposed in Hollywood films. For example, Asian Americans were less likely than African Americans to find portrayal of lower intelligence as offensive, but that may be attributable to the fact that Asian Americans are less likely to be stereotypically portrayed that way. By the same token, African Americans were less likely than Asian Americans to find offensive the portrayal of their ethnic group as linguistically handicapped, probably because they are less likely to be portrayed that way in film. In other words, people were offended by cliched portrayals of their own group, but the content of the cliches varied across ethnic groups.

Present results indicate that, as a group, European Americans do take less offense at film portrayals of themselves than ethnic minority groups. On the other hand, cultural or religious sub-groups of European Americans can and do take umbrage at media characterizations. An interesting finding occurred with the European American respondents in this study. Although offenses that cited the bigotry theme were most common for European Americans, offenses that cited criminal activity, deficiencies in intellectual skill and occupational stereotypes were also frequently cited. A closer inspection of the data revealed that the majority of these Theme 1 objections came from those handful of Euro-American respondents who identified themselves as coming from Italian ($n = 7$) or Irish ($n = 5$) ancestry and who were tired of Mafia and IRA images endlessly portrayed on the screen. Films such as Goodfellas, Casino, The Godfather, Showgirls, and The Devil's Own were cited as commercing in these images.. Indeed, The Godfather was the third most offensive film for the European American respondents.

Endless newspaper and magazine articles and Italian Anti-Defamation leagues have explored, expressed or protested popular culture's romantic obsession with the Italian Mafia and the assumption that every Italian-American is suspected of having some "mob" connection. The recent success of the television series "The Sopranos" has placed an even finer point on this concern. But it is the cultural (Yuppies), economic (e.g. poor white trash), regional (e.g., southern rednecks) or religious (e.g., bible-thumping Baptists) affiliations which may be the lightning rod for these European Americans, rather than, in most cases, their ethnicity per se.

What a viewer finds particularly offensive varies also as a function of ethnicity. Hispanic Americans and African Americans were the most likely to be offended by portrayals of themselves as criminal or intellectually inept while Asian Americans resented most the obsession in American (and Asian American) films with martial arts, the pervasive absence of Asian Americans in American films, and the tendency to find Asian American cultures as interchangeable. They also found ignorance and/or wanton disregard of historical or cultural Asian American practices and traditions particularly offensive. As expected, European Americans evidenced the least likelihood to take offense at filmic portrayals. The instances where they took offense were generally in the arena of stereotypic historic or contemporary abuse of majority power rather than of being the object of abuse or filmic under-representation or invisibility.

Minorities Offended by Minority-Made Films

A question arising from one result of the present study bears particular exploration, namely, why were minority group respondents, most notably African- and Hispanic Americans, so offended by films often directed by, and/or written by, and/or starring ethnically-congruent creative elements? On the surface, one might expect that it would be films made by Euro-American filmmakers which would garner the lion's share of citations. And in terms of the sheer number of individual films cited as containing offensive portrayals, this is true. But, in terms of the films which rank highest in containing offenses, the reality is otherwise, and would seem to derive from a confluence of special forces.

The first author has worked as a screenwriter and script analyst in Hollywood for the past 15 years and was a script judge for the Minority Access Program of the Writers Guild of America for five years. It is well known within the film industry that past the age of 30, the rate of unemployment of screenwriters increases with age and as late as 1997, 73% of all employed screen and television writers were under age 31 (Bielby & Bielby, 1998). Comparable data for actors reported by Gerbner (1988) indicated that 61% of actors employed in 1997 were under 40. Furthermore, research by Fischhoff (1997) revealed that between 1984 and 1987, most African American films, especially the most successful African American films not vehicles for Eddie Murphy and Denzel Washington, and the most successful Latino films, dealt with storylines centered around characters under age 30.

In part, these data reflect the preference for studios to produce and distribute films targeted to audiences under age 30 as they are the biggest source of box office revenue (Austin, 1989). But this also necessitates, in the studios' minds, that the writers, and actors obviously, should also be attuned to this youth market. Youths prefer edgy storylines involving the downtrodden rebelling against authority, and an abundance of violence and sex. Young, minority writers tend to write what they know, can relate to, or that with which they are most familiar. Oftentimes, (with no little prompting from producers) this ends up being stories about what is thematically "edgy," such as stories laden with gangs, drugs, explicit sex, and violence. Unfortunately, softer storylines, such as in the film Love Jones, tend not to do that well at the box office (Fischhoff, 1997). Thus, for every Eve's Bayou, there are 20 Juice's, for every Mi Familia, there are 5 Desperado's. Consequently, minority audiences seeking films that are ethnically-congruent, are more likely to be exposed to films which have a high probability of trading in tired violence or sex stereotypes and tired and violent, cliché storylines.

Conclusions

Present research clearly documents that all ethnic groups represented in the study found much by which to be offended in Hollywood movies. Future research might explore, through a more age-representative sample.

It is clear from the results that there is a time-honored tendency for movies to commerce in stereotypes or overgeneralizations about culture and personality. It is also just as clear that some groups which have traditionally occupied the lower tier of the socioeconomic ladder, such as African- and Hispanic Americans, find themselves targets of different stereotypes than other groups, such as Asian- or Native Americans. But it is also apparent that there are no surprises in these results. Research on decade-spanning, commonly held prejudices toward minority groups (e.g., Davis & Smith, 1996) shows a clear correspondence with what respondents in this study reacted to in films. So the oft-heard remark that Hollywood trades in tired and cliched stereotypes would seem to have merit.

At the same time, new or recent immigration trends and traditional geo-political conflicts have bestowed a new set of occupants in Hollywood's house of stereotypes. Immigrants from former Soviet Block countries find themselves branded as violent mafia-types in movies. The time-honored Christian-Muslim conflict has generated for Hollywood a never-ending supply of evil or buffoonish terrorists, hapless pawns of dictators, or fundamentalists with brutal agendas toward the enemy and toward women. This stereotype of the Muslim brute was most clearly denounced by Muslims in our sample by the film Not Without My Daughter. Clearly, as Allport's (1954) classic tome on the social psychology of racism and prejudice elucidated, unless and until there is a fairer and broader representation of ethnic minority groups in the mass media, concern over inaccurate or unrepresentative portrayals will continue to draw concern and disapproval from implicated, interested, and concerned citizens. From what we can observe over the course of film history, some groups cycle out of being unfairly portrayed in film, others cycle in, and still others continue to remain the object of such offensive portrayals, regardless of objections and alarm-raising research.

As minorities increasingly find their social-political voices, the chorus of objections to stereotypically unflattering screen portrayals is likely to rattle the chambers of Congress and Hollywood studios with increasing intensity. This chorus of disapproval should result in increasing sensitivity to minority concerns. But, as the diversity wars presently being fought across the landscape of television reveal, sensitivity does not always translate into needed changes in casting, story development and

character structure. In the end, entertainment is a bottom line industry and unless the aggrieved parties make it profitable to dispense with unrepresentative stereotypes and make it punitive to perpetuate them, little is likely to change in the commerce in stereotypes.

In fact, little was evidenced in the present study by comments made by respondents to indicate that, at least for the foreseeable future, offensive portrayals will deter most from patronizing films that are well-publicized or receive good word-of-mouth. It is unfortunate that many of the smaller and independent films which actually provide far more positive portrayals of minorities are rarely seen by most minority filmgoers. Research by Fischhoff et al. (1997), showed quite unmistakably that these films (e.g., Love Jones, To Sleep With Anger, Eve's Bayou, Chan Is Missing, The Wedding Banquet, Romero) are rarely if ever mentioned in favorite films lists of minority respondents. Wider distribution and promotion of such films would help bring their positive images to these filmgoers. But profits drive production and marketing decisions. Filmgoers, (and minority filmgoers are no exception) do not go to see films they do not know about and rush to see films that are well advertised (Tsui, 1998). These smaller films get poor promotion and distribution, resulting in less awareness of these films by the younger and less educated minority moviegoing audiences, while the bigger budget, more widely distributed studio supported films, which garner huge minority group box office revenues, more often trade in convenient stereotypes.

If minority audiences who are offended by screen portrayals and characterizations come to realize that deciding what movies to patronize is not only an entertainment choice but is also a political action at the ticket booth, if they proactively spread the word about what movies deserve quick and better patronage and what movies should be boycotted, as has been done by an African American activist group in Texas called "The First Friday Club," they can begin to dismantle, the triad of stereotype-engorged, offense-laden, and box office-successful Hollywood products.

To complicate matters, though, it is clear that, even within minority group filmgoers, what is accurate portrayal for some is stereotypic and negative for others. Jason Johansen, for example, a former professor of Latino film and media, noted in a recent article (Johansen, 1999) that films depicting the

immigrant experience, such as La Ciudad (1999), were found to be offensive by Latinos because they present an image of Latinos as “being only that way.” Moreover, Johansen cites several films which he felt were positive expressions of the Latino community and box office successes, films which were, ironically, high on the list in our sample as very offensive, especially the Cheech Marin film, Born in East L.A.

Finally, it would seem that, while minority (and some majority) filmmakers consider it important to remind each generation of viewers about past mistreatment of ethnic groups, a substantial number of African Americans are tired of such films because the films reiterate an oppressed (and oppressible?) view of their ethnicity, an image they are seeking to put behind them. Presumably, the adage that people who forget their past are destined to repeat it may be seen as a double-edged sword.

Footnotes

1. In the final analysis, regarding attempts to get as broad and representative a sample of the population as possible, it became apparent that inaccessibility of certain ethnic groups was problematic and the demographics of the obtained sample was less than ideal on a variety of levels. Older African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans, for example, were both more difficult to access and frequently, in the latter instances, spoke little or no English. Additionally, approximately one-third of the total sample of respondents came from Cal State, Los Angeles where 47% of the student population is Hispanic American and that approximately 65% of both the student population is female. This resulted in an overrepresentation of Hispanic Americans (37%) and of females (61%) in the total sample, one of the shortcomings of the sampling strategy due, in part, to the absence of research funding.

2. A definition of the term “offended” was not provided in the instructional section of the survey although the survey did offer the following instruction: “This survey explores what films viewers have found to be offensive to their own ethnic group and the reasons the films were offensive. This could include films which might be found to be offensive because of the ways in which they portray or otherwise characterize your ethnic group.” It was obvious from the pilot surveys (done to progressively refine and test the clarity of the survey format and instructions), and from observations of people filling out surveys in the media psychology laboratory (where lab team members were available for any task clarification purposes), that a sufficiently common meaning of the term “offensive to your own ethnic group” was shared by respondents.

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