QUESTIONING ETHNORACE IN THE LIKABILITY OF TELEVISION AND FILM CHARACTERS: WHO AND WHAT DO YOUNG AUDIENCES FIND LIKABLE?

ADOLFO RAFAEL MORA*

ABSTRACT

Through student essays, this study examined the likability that young adults in the US had for television and/or film characters—both fictional and/or real—across three scenarios: (1) with a disliked character who shared the ethnic or racial identity of the participant, (2) with a likable character who was an ethnic or racial minority characters, and (3) between their utmost liked and disliked TV/film character regardless of their ethnic/racial identification. The likability of TV or film characters was dependent on their inner attractiveness—a characterization based on selflessness, friendliness, and interpersonal empathy. Ethnicity and/or race became a salient factor for ethnoracial minorities when they wrote about dislikable ingroup characters, because these social identities were associated with outer unattractiveness—that is, characterizations relating to appearance and speech that stereotyped and devalued them in the narrative. When asked to contrast likable and dislikable characters, participants rarely questioned them according to ethnic or racial qualities, and social identities like gender was likely to guide their discussions. Study findings captured the onscreen marginality that ethnic/racial minorities and/or face, and the manners in which audiences shift between personal and social identities to make sense of media experiences.

Keywords: audience, ethnicity, gender, likability, marginality, race, social identity.

INTRODUCTION

As mediums concerned with moving images, television and film share multiple similarities in narrativizing and visualizing the social world onscreen. Entertainment content is most successful when it offers audiences likable and identifiable characters, whether these are fictional or real. However, the rather frequent reduction of ethnoracial minorities into a set of one-dimensional traits makes it less likely for television and film audiences to experience complex characters onscreen—at least.

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when it comes to US media (GLAAD, 2014; Hunt et al., 2016; Larson, 2006; The Opportunity Agenda, 2011; Valdivia, 2010). The problem seems to be that either ethnoracial minorities groups are excluded in mainstream media or selectively included to play criminal, sexual, or cultural Others – those characters who fall outside the (White) norm (Gray, 2004; hooks, 1992; Ramirez Berg, 2002; Valdivia, 2010). In fact, when compared to Black and Latin@ characters, Asians and Native Americans are the least visible ethnoracial groups on scripted (primetime) television or narrative film (Fitzpatrick, 2015; Signorelli, 2009; Tukachinsky, Mastro & Yerchi, 2015). This over- and/or under-representation makes it likely that media audiences remember certain ethnoracial groups more than others, which in turn, may influence who audiences identify with, and what they find likable about ethnoracial groups.

This article qualitatively explores the likability of television and film characters and the manners in which ethnicity and race shape viewer-character taste. Discussing what frames ethnoracial (dis)likability helps us understand how marginality informs entertainment content and why audiences gravitate or evade content. In other words, we are able to examine what symbolic worth is given to ethnicity and race when forming parasocial relationships/identifications with media characters (Cohen 2001, 2005; Giles, 2002). Studying likable media characters is also important because these are central in keeping audiences invested into the texts they consume (Hoffner & Cantor 1991). Media audiences are also likely to treat likable characters as pseudo-friends, thus establishing them as powerful persuasive agents in mediated contexts (Bandura, 2002). As an audience study, this article contributes to audience media research by contrasting television and film characters and understanding viewer-character likability across different in-/out-group ethnoracial contexts.

Before proceeding to the literature review, it is important to address some terminology in this study. Here, ethnorac is used to capture the interchangeable and conflated nature of ethnicity and race as negotiated identity constructs (Alcoff 2009). It tries to discuss the racialized nature of ethnicity (e.g., people fixed into groups based on they look) and the ethnicized nature of race (e.g., belonging to a group based on they way one looks). This article also uses ethnicity and race separately to describe cultural and self-chosen identities (such as ethnicity) versus imposed and visual identity categories (such as race).

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND SYMBOLIC MARGINALITY

Media audiences unquestionably develop strong affinities and identifications with onscreen personae whose subjectivities match their own (Giles, 2002; Hoffner & Cantor 1991; Cohen 2001, 2005; Morley, 1992; Press, 1991). However, given the disproportionate depictions of social groups on television and film which favors whites, men, heterosexuals, and middle-class individuals (GLAAD 2014; Hunt et al. 2016; Larson. 2006; Tukachinsky et al. 2015), minorities are therefore less likely to find images of themselves onscreen that they may enjoy. That is, for ethnoracial minorities, their chances of consuming positive images is limited if the dominant depictions of Blacks are in relationship to criminality (Gray, 2004), Latin@s associated with undocumented immigration (Valdivia 2010), and Asians reduced to model minorities (Ono & Pham 2009). Cultural scholars (Bobo, 1995; hooks, 1992) have even argued that ethnoracial groups repress their ethnicity and racial identification for a social
identity—typically that of a dominant group—in order to make their media experience pleasurable. Surveys go on to suggest that Black (Abrams & Giles, 2007) and Latin@ television viewers (Abram & Giles, 2009) selected and avoided programming based on group vitality needs. Undeniably, when it comes to the media portrayals, ethnoracial minorities face a symbolic disadvantage compared to the ethnoracial majority.

With the popularity of television and film today as entertainment mediums, the next question is: Does television offer more positive images of ethnoracial minorities than film? Both mediums draw on the similar racial, ethnic, and cultural portrayals to tell its stories, often casting ethnoracial minorities as the Other (Boogle, 2002; Ramirez Berg, 2002). One key difference between television and film is how the former is more likely to flesh-out its characters and storylines across several episodes on a season as opposed to compacting a narrative that should run for about 90-minutes. Television also has the advantage of offering a plethora of characters ranging from fictional to real, whereas film is often treated as a fiction-based medium. While news and reality TV genres contribute with real people on television, news content is notorious for featuring the criminality associated with ethnoracial minorities (Larson, 2006), and while reality TV also casts talent to recreate stereotypes, this genre in particular offers ethnoracial minorities opportunities to be included onscreen (Hunt et al. 2016).

**ETHNORACIAL GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND MEDIA RECEPTION**

Social identity theory (SIT) explains the social and psychological processes that motivate people in adopting group identities. The group that one adopts (the ingroup) is often differentiated against another (the outgroup) to situate its social and cultural worth (see Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). Media audiences categorize characters—whether fictional or real—as in-/out-group members and engage in intergroup comparisons similar to those offscreen (Harwood & Roy, 2005). Any ingroup depictions that challenge positive social identities are therefore pointed out.

Indeed, ethnoracial minorities are keen observers of how their ingroup is portrayed in the media. Ethnoracial minorities question ingroup members in the media if there is incongruence between onscreen and offscreen realities (Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Rivadeneyra, 2006), when hyper-sexuality is perceived a disservice to the community (Rojas, 2004), if negative image affect their self-esteem (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011), and if one gender is more positive than the other onscreen (Mok, 1998). Of concern to ethnoracial is how these unfavorable ingroup depictions do little to offset the stereotypes that outgroups have about them. Research has found a correlation between negative images of ethnoracial minorities and negative group attitudes among Whites (Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Tukachinsky et al., 2015).

Research that examines out- and in-group media content suggest that media audiences flock to their ingroup, and in some cases, ethnoracial minorities are likely to point out ethnic and racial concerns. Cooper (1998) found that Blacks tended to write about racism portrayed in Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* (1989) than were Hispanic or white audiences. Rockler (2002) similarly observed that Black audiences tended to read the political and racial commentaries of two Back comic strips—*The Boondocks* and *Jump Start*—more so than White study participants. Fujioka (2005) also found that Mexican American (in comparison to White) audiences were more likely to recall and find news stories more arousing when these were about ingroup members.
THE PRESENT STUDY

Ethnoracial minority television and film audiences have few opportunities to like ingroup figures given the limited, stereotypic, or assimilated depictions that exist of their ethnoracial group onscreen (Fitzpatrick, 2015; Gray, 2004; Hunt et al. 2016; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Mok, 1998; Ramirez Berg, 2002; Tukachinsky et al. 2015; Valdivia, 2010). While positive images of ethnoracial minorities exist in popular culture, their frequent exclusion and/or selected inclusion needs to be continuously examined in order to address contemporary forms of marginality. To grasp these practices, we must listen and pay attention to how media audiences talk or articulate ethnicity and race in their media experience. The three research questions below explore the manners in which ethnorace informs audience-character (dis)likability, since these are the most salient, memorable, influential, and emotionally connected characters for audiences (Chory, 2013; Cohen, 1999; Tian & Hoffner 2010).

The study is particularly interested if sharing an ethnic or racial identity with TV/film characters determines negative reactions to them. To do so, the first research question situates dislikability with ingroup characters, since these images threaten the ingroup directly according to SIT (Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). With this in mind:

RQ1: What is dislikable about TV/film characters when these share an ethnoracial ingroup status with audiences?

The second research question addresses ethnoracial groups and what establishes their likability. Of interest here is if they are evaluated differently when compared to ingroups and if these assessments vary by group chosen. Only ethnoracial minority outgroups are evaluated to see who is less likely to be associated with their typical and negative media traits (Gray, 2004; Larson, 2006; Mok, 1998; Valdivia, 2010). So:

RQ2: When it comes to a liked ethnoracial minority outgroup, who is associated with a favorable media status and what qualities establish it?

The last research question lifts the in-/out-group restrictions and directly and simply compares liked and disliked characters. Such question attempts to see if audiences incorporate social identities into their affective responses with characters. Because ethnicity and race is the focus of this article:

RQ3: Do media audiences talk about ethnorace when it comes to their most liked and disliked TV/film characters?

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected from a convenience sample of university students who took an introductory communication course at a Southwest US university during June 2013. Most students were sophomores and juniors majoring in Kinesiology who needed the course to satisfy the university’s requirement of a speech class.

While the media experiences of university students are not generalizable across entertainment audiences, this group—as part of the Millennial generation (those born
after 1980)—represents the target demographic for most media content today (Stout 2015). Typed essays were the data instruments of choice for this study, similar to other media reception studies that also focused on race and ethnicity among college students (e.g., Cooper 1998). Response essays encourage intimate self-dialogues that prompt salient, meaningful, and memorable experiences that participants chose to translate into words (Grennan, 1988). This methodological logic matches the affective impact that (dis)likable and favorite TV/film figures have on audiences (see Cohen 1999). Each research question was written as its own essay prompt and offered to students as extra credit.

Participants were asked to write one to two, double-spaced page responses for three essay prompts: (1) Identify a television or film character that you dislike but shares the same ethnicity or race as you and explain why you dislike this character (RQ1); (2) Discuss a television of film character that you like and has a favorable media presence but does not belong to your ethnic or racial group and is considered a minority (RQ2); (3) Compare and contrast a likeable and dislikable television or film characters and why you like or dislike them (RQ3). Students answered RQ1 first, followed by RQ2 two weeks later, and concluded with RQ3 one week later. Because study participation was offered as extra credit opportunities, not all students consistently turned in all three essays. Tables 1 through 3 offer the demographic composition of the current sample. Participants were young adults (ages ranged from 18 to 26), mostly women, and had ethnroracial minority backgrounds (i.e., Latin@, Black, Asian). Participants were given pseudo-names to protect their identities.

Of interest to this research study was how participants articulated their experiences with TV/film characters that shared their ethnic or racial identity and what qualities they made salient. To do so requires an inductive analytical approach that pays attention to participants’ self-reflection and worldview. Grounded theory is both an analytical and methodological tool; it was employed here as a means to analyze the data inductively, intuitively, and creatively (Hussein, Hirst, Salyers, & Osuji 2014). The goal of this study was not to create a new theory that contextually explains the findings but to understand the affective ties that entertainment users forge with media figures factoring ethnicity and race into the relationship. Grounded analysis (or conceptual description), as opposed to grounded theory (or abstract conceptualization), seems more appropriate for this data context, which aims to describe patterns rather than transcend them into an integrated theory that explains social behavior (see Glasser, 2001). Following its recommendation of not imposing categories on the data, this study formulated categories and concepts pertinent to each research question. The section that follows explains the study findings.

**STUDY FINDINGS**

Before addressing the research, questions asked in this study, we should first address the type of characters that audiences wrote about: Are they television of film characters? Fictitious or real people onscreen? Discussing this would minimize the generalization of study findings across mediums and people onscreen. Chosen characters came from television as opposed to film and these were part of fictional and scripted narratives (see Tables 1-3). Regardless of medium, audiences evaluated both TV and film characters rather similarly. Nevertheless, real characters were often...
associated with television and tended to be actors, comedians, reality TV personalities, and wrestlers (frequency in this order). One key difference between fictional and real characters was that the latter were often perceived as particularly persuasive and representative of larger collectives. Elena (Latin@, woman) liked Salma Hayek, because she “mirrors the American dream for all Mexican audiences, giving the Mexican viewer a sense of hope in being successful among los gringos. She made us all proud of whom we were.” Similarly, Devin (Black man) felt that Denzel Washington’s “poise and radiantly sane intelligence permeate whatever film he is in...[and] expands the range of dramatic roles given to African-American actors and actresses.” What is interesting is how some audiences (typically White) deracialized celebrities, writing about their amiable personas instead of their contribution to their ethnoracial communities. This was the case of Whitney (White woman) who wrote:

Will Smith is a humble guy who has outstanding work ethics, a good guy, and loyal to his family... [although he divorced Jada Pinkett Smith] they kept it classy...he’s very mature and well respected by individuals around the world. He may not be as popular as other actors this day and age but his legacy of being mature and well-mannered individuals will forever live on.

Other than lauding celebrities for their career achievements and commendable character, university students generally evaluated media characters according to their wittiness, warmth, and interpersonal competence – conceptualized here as inner attractiveness.

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1 (RQ1): What do ethnoracial groups consider dislikable about their ingroups in TV/film?**

Ethnoracial minority audiences were likely to focus on the external characteristics (that is, racial traits) that visually and auditorily marked their ingroup Otherness. Conversely, whites typically centered on the immorality, egoism, and unfriendliness of ingroup TV/film figures – characteristics pertaining to the inner self. Ethnoracial minorities still questioned the inner unattractiveness of their ingroup members but did so much less than outer unattractiveness. That is, non-white media audiences wrote in detail about how ingroup representations worked blue-collar jobs, had grotesque or sexualized appearance, wore insensitive cultural attires, had thick accents, embodied docile or over-the-top personalities, and were associated with profanity. Jaime (Latin@ man), for instance, wrote that the laughter of Papi Boulevardez in Disney’s *The Proud Family* (2001-2005) got on his nerves, because “he has a loud and obnoxious laugh that mimics the Joker from Batman that I find very displeasing...[Also] his attire fits the Zoot suit image that resembles the 1920s gangsters.” Xeuo (East Asian woman) disliked Kimmy Jin from the film *Pitch Perfect* (Moore, 2012), because she embodied all Asian stereotypes:

She constantly studied, she had long straight hair, she wore khaki pants with an ironed shirt, and she only had Asian friends...Although this may be true for certain individuals, this is only a small portion representing the larger community...Like all stereotypes, they only represent the most extreme
characteristics; however, we are all individually different and we all have our own personal characteristics.

In contrast, whites tended to find ingroup TV/film characters dislikeable because of their inner unattractiveness (e.g., antisocial behaviors, immorality). Steven (white man) deemed Clarence Morrow from the TV show *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014) as self-serving; he explains:

In the show, George had her portrayed as drunk and a horrible mother that would choose drinking over taking care of him, which in turn, which she really admits in the show quite a few times. Benny and George have very settle differences in the means of caring for family and working hard and having fun in life. (Ricardo, Latin@ man, on *The George Lopez Show*, 2007-2010)

Other TV characters such as Walter White from *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) were similarly disliked: “I feel he is an abusive, self-centered, money obsessed individual...These are poor qualities to have as a protagonist...[He] could be less violent, especially to his wife to become a more likeable and relatable character” (Ben, white man). Sentiments from white and non-white audiences support the notion that media representations of ethnoracial minorities on television and film are racialized, prompting ethnoracial minority audiences to more likely question the racial and ethnocultural characterizations of their mediated ingroups as opposed to personal qualities of characters like whites tended to do.

Table 1. *Descriptive Categories of Disliked Ethnoracial Ingroups* (RQ1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Gender Outgroup</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Real</td>
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<td>TV</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Men</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<td>Women²</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
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*Note:* ¹Multi-ethnoracial, ²Turkish
Table 2. Descriptive Categories of Successful Ethnoracial Minority Outgroups (RQ2)

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<tr>
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<td>Men</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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<td>Latina@</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>TV</td>
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<td>Film</td>
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Note: a1 = South Asian, bTurkish, cJewish, dNative American, eIranian
Table 3. Descriptive Categories of Liked and Disliked Media Figures (RQ3)

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<th>Disliked Media Figure</th>
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Note: <sup>a</sup> = South Asian, <sup>b</sup> = Multi-ethnorace, <sup>c</sup> = Turkish
RESEARCH QUESTION 2 (RQ2): What ethnoracial minority is liked and why?

Current media audiences named black TV/film figures as the most likable ethnoracial minority group, plus one with a noteworthy media presence (see Table 2). East Asians came in second followed by Latin@s. All ethnoracial groups were lauded because they exemplified upward social mobility onscreen (e.g., affluence, white-collar professions, and eloquent speech). Setting social status aside, blacks were primarily liked for their selflessness and caring nature. For instance, Sandra (white, woman) wrote that Abillen Clark from *The Help* (Taylor, 2011), because she was “a wonderful character because she instills traits in young girls that their mothers are too naïve to teach them, and she is a much better overall person than all the white women in the film.” Frank (White man) wrote that Philip Banks on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) was a loving father and “an excellent example not just for African-American men, but to all men as to how they should love their families.” Patty (white woman) considered the Baxter family in *That’s So Raven* (2003-2007) as “warm, caring, and adventurous.” Even John Creasy a film character in *Man on Fire* (Scott, 2004) was admirable for sacrificing his life to save Pita, and according to Jose (Latin@ man): “This showed dedication to his job and how attached he had become to Pita, who looked at him as more than just a bodyguard, but as someone that he considered family.” These examples pair black likability and respect with collectivism as well as parental and sacrificial.

Asian likability was associated with model minority traits such as competence, independence, and intelligent; most characters interestingly came from television shows. Joan Watson on *Elementary* (2012—) “chooses not work in the medical field because of intellect, but because of an accident. She’s very resourceful when it comes to the on-goings of Holmes, though” (Harry, white man). Christina Yang in *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005—) “is known to be competitive, ambitious, and intelligent. She dislikes hugs, being told what to do, and losing at any activity. Yang struggles to suppress her humanity in pursuit of being a perfect surgeon” (Mina, white women). Other named Asian characters such as Kahn Souphanousinphone from *King of the Hill* (1997-2010) were respectively wealthy, smart, and rational – even more so than their character counterparts according to participants who wrote about them.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3 (RQ3): Do audiences talk about ethnicity and race on their most (dis)liked TV/film figures?

When asked to compare and contrast their most liked and disliked TV/film character, audiences consistently chose someone that belonged to the same gender as them but not ethnically or racially (see Table 3). This trend suggests that audiences here typically used gender rather than ethnicity/race to make sense of viewer-character likability. Women were more likely than men to expressively situate their taste on gender, plus were more likely to add other identities (e.g., age, ethnicity/race) and roles (e.g., parental, professional) into their gendered media experience. Take for instance these cases:
Meredith and I have a lot in common as women: we carry burdens, have fear of not having/being able to be mothers, and if we are, are we cut for it? When we love, we give it all. (Julie, White woman, on Grey’s Anatomy, 2005—)

In the show, George had her portrayed as drunk and a horrible mother that would choose drinking over taking care of him, which in turn, which she really admits in the show quite a few times. Benny and George have very settle differences in the means of caring for family and working hard and having fun in life. (Ricardo, Latin@ man, on The George Lopez Show, 2007-2010)

Bella is the stereotypical teenage girl who follows her boyfriend around like a lost puppy. Bella would have no life “worth” without Edward. I hate that she is dependable on him. However, Hermione [from Harry Potter] is dependable and able to bale to make her own choices….she is still reliable to her friends. (Mina, white woman, on Twilight, 2008)

Even if the excerpts above suggest that social identities are behind viewer-character likability, a good majority of affective ties were not explicitly grounded on group membership. Instead, trustworthiness (e.g., honest, loyal, reliable), empathy (e.g., compassion, humble, caring), and social mobility attributes (e.g., intelligence, perseverance, diligence) were integral in liking media figures. When media figures personified selfishness (e.g., egoism), immorality (e.g., manipulative), and affability, participants disliked them. Such feelings echo participants’ social judgments made on previous essays about inner attractiveness and the likability of media figures. To illustrate, Jasmine (Lain@ woman) wrote that Merle from The Walking Dead (2010—) was a bit more likable when he sacrificed himself: “I think one of the reasons I dislike him, so much is because his own volatile nature reminds me...When he redeemed himself, it felt like I could be redeemed as well, which was a strange thing to feel.” Patty (white woman) could not stand the women cast of The Real Housewives of Orange County (2006–), because they “spend all their time and resources shopping and gossiping instead of helping others.”

The likability of TV/film characters also depended if entertainment users could identify with them. Likable media figures had similar personalities, dispositions, or life subjectivities to participants. Employing we or s/he and I statements were ways in which participants indicated viewer-character similarity.

One major similarity that Phil Dunphy and I share is confidence. In the show, Phil works as real estate agent and has extreme confidence in his work. He once said, “I could sell a fur coat to an Esmiko”...Phil is also very competitive. One example of this nature is he wants to beat out his competitors in the real estate business to be the top realtor in town. I can relate to this because I hate to lose more than I love to win. (Jaime, Latin@ man, on Modern Family, 2009—)

Stiles has to stay on the sidelines while his friend fights, which frustrates me a lot. I identify with this struggle, because I do not see myself being super
helpful to other or I do not know how to be helpful. This leaves me just standing on the sideline wondering what to do and feeling useless. (Jasmine, Lain@ woman, on Teen Wolf, 2011—)

Just as Charlotte, I often times found myself in a position where no one understood me, or as the movie is titled Lost in Translation...because it was very hard for me to express myself and my emotions in words. (Zehra, Turkish woman)

The above cases imply personal identifications, but some participants articulated their affective ties to TV/film characters under masculine (e.g., competitiveness, confidence) and feminine discourses (e.g., useful, expressing feelings). Such media experiences are tricky to situate as gendered since participants did not frame them as such. What can be concluded, however, is that audiences empathetically related to media figures and that viewer-character identification occurs through intersected personal, social, and role identities that are difficult to parse out.

DISCUSSION
The general purpose of this study was to explore how ethnicity and race informed the likability of TV/film characters. It appears that ethnoracial minorities incorporate ethnoracial discourses when outer unattractiveness (e.g., delinquency, underrated professions, speech incompetence) characterizes their ingroups, thus prompting dislikability. Media audiences in this study were more likely to (dis)like characters on the basis of gender rather than other social identities. It must be noted, however, that prosociality (e.g., warmth, selfless, or friendly) trumped ethnorace and gender, with liked TV/film characters often being those embodying this quality. If TV/film characters lacked prosociality, then these were often disliked due to their perceived interpersonal coldness and selfishness. Overall, the situational (or contextual) position of ethnicity and race suggest that these are primed when mediated representations directly threaten the ethnoracial ingroup. Because ethnorace became a salient factor when disliking TV/film characters for ethnoracial minorities, it suggests that marginality still envelops their onscreen presence.

Like other audience research (Cooper, 1998; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Mok, 1998; Rockler, 2002; Rivadeneyra, 2006; Rojas, 2004), ethnoracial minorities tended to perform ethnic/racialized readings (particular with disliked ingroup characters), pointing to their symbolic disadvantage onscreen. Social identity theory (SIT) suggests that when a social identity is threatened, people engage in several strategies to compensate the damage and achieve a positive self-concept (Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). Ethnoracial minorities questioned the negative ethnic and racial traits of ingroup members onscreen because these devalue their group status. Prisma (South Asian woman) supports this notion when she wrote that Sonia Solandres—a detective in the film Pink Panther 2 (Zwart, 2009)—“was the one that stole the pink panther. This gives society a view to never trust this ethnicity because maybe they could do that in real life.” Bobby (Latin@ man) similarly critiqued the criminality attached to Latin@ TV characters like that portrayed in Weeds (2005-2012): “It does not matter the context in which the Hispanic characters appears, the purpose for them being in the show is
just to show another example of the broken laws that they are involved in.” Ethnoracial minorities care what is communicated about them onscreen, since these images tend to showcase unattractive features of their ingroups. Rockler (2002) also suggests that ethnoracial minorities are likely to read media through a terministic screen of racial cognizance, whereas white audiences adopt the terministic screen of Whiteness. These divergent readings are due to ethnoracial minorities being aware of their social standing in stratified and racialized society. It could be that ethnoracial minority audiences racialized their writing to express how their offscreen marginality transfers onscreen.

Nevertheless, not all characters were written from a standpoint of race and ethnicity; this was particularly evident when participants compared their most liked and disliked character (RQ3). The demographic profile of the current sample could explain why other social identities such as gender informed audience-character likability. Women comprised the majority of study participants, thus increasing the possibility of finding gendered readings. Nevertheless, what women wrote about media figures is not without any grounds, seeing that men (57%) outnumber women (43%) in primetime television (GLAAD, 2014) and disproportionate in regard to portraying home life and occupations. Undermining social class could also explain why gender was a dominant social identity in the study. Press (1991) found that working-class white women questioned social class onscreen, while middle-class white women focused on gender. Middle-class white women centered on gender because social class was no longer a concern like it were for working-class white women. It could be that as university students, participants ruled out social class due to their status as people on an upward track of social mobility, therefore channeling other social identities that differentiated them.

Black characters topped Asian characters regarding a likeable ethnoracial outgroup (RQ2), not because black characters these were the new model minority but for embodying a moral code of selflessness. This inner attractiveness established black characters as socially warm onscreen. While positive in the eyes of audiences, such prosocial quality about blacks resemble the self-sacrificial, paternal/maternal, and happy Uncle Tom or Mammy figures of early cinema (Boogle, 2002). What results is an ideologically problematic Black image, which conflates selflessness with self-satisfied servitude. These optimistic black portrayals on film and television may not be enough to offset the vilified and criminal depictions that ground them onscreen (Gray 2004). Take for instance what Trisha (black woman) wrote about Freedom Writers (LaGravenese, 2007)—a film about a high school teacher educated inner-city youth—where black students were portrayed as delinquents, and Asians characters (such as Sindy) were intelligent and shy. She concluded her essay with: “I am African-American and I know I can do the same thing other Asians can do and our minority group does not receive enough credit for all the things that we do.” For Trisha, it appears that black TV/film depictions have not fully articulated the diversity, accomplishments, and other contributions her ethnoracial group has performed, even if positive ingroup images exist out there.

Latin@s were the least mentioned and liked ethnoracial minority outgroup. The possibly exists that the theatrically-released and critically-acclaimed films with Black characters released during the years of the study (e.g., The Help, Django Unchained, Beasts of the Southern Wild) helped audiences to write about black characters as
opposed to other ethnoracial minority groups; additionally, black characters on
television match their US Census figures (Signorielli, 2009), giving them an upper hand
in regard to visibility. Still, even if Latin@s out number Asian characters on television
(Tukachinsky et al., 2015), they are not often associated with model minority or
prosocial qualities. Hao (East Asian woman) wrote that in Fast Five (Lin, 2011)—a film
about illegal street racing set in Brazil—“Dom helps Han Lue to get his freedom by
robbing Reyes, taking his money that he took away from his people. There isn’t any
way that Reyes is being portrayed positively, just more powerful and rich than Han.”
This case highlights that criminality enabled economic success, not leadership, hard
work, or competence—model minority qualities in other words. Even Latin@
participants mentioned that ingroup members are rarely portrayed as upwardly mobile,
and instead, we get TV characters like Esteban from The Suite Life of Zack and Cody
(2005-2008): “They made him seem like he was stupid and incompetent to everyday
life. Also, him being a bell boy, why not change him to a co-manager...something like
that can have a positive impact on my culture” (Amelia, Latina woman).
Even if TV and film characters were similarly evaluated, participants still tended to
write about television over film characters on their essays. The narrative timeframe of
each medium could explain the finding. Media audiences develop parasocial
relationship and identifications with characters that they can relate to (Giles, 2002,
Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Cohen 2001, 2005), and television offers its audiences the
opportunity to fully immerse themselves with characters whose subjectivities are
developed across multiple and intricate story arcs on a given season. Films, on the
other hand, prioritize the journey of the hero in a rather linear story, with little room to
develop its supporting characters. This explanation merits future research to clarify its
speculation.
Lastly, this study supports previous quantitative research that also focused on
audience-character likability (Chory, 2013; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Like their studies,
participants used demographic and personality similarity, as well as social attraction, to
describe their affective responses with liked characters. The contribution of this article
is in its exploration of ethnicity and race in liking or disliking TV/film characters, which
was not factored in such studies. This study found ethnoracial group differences only
when it comes to disliked TV/film characters—consistent with media research that
compared audiences (Fujikoa, 2005; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Rockler, 2002). Ethnoracial
groups prioritized centered on almost opposite types of attraction—conceptualized
here as inner and outer attraction—which cautions media researchers and practitioners
to consider ethnoracial difference when talking about or producing content with
traditionally marginalized groups.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**
The small sample size, data artifact, and social position of participants in this study
do not make the study findings generalizable to broader TV or film audiences. Study
findings should therefore not be over-stated. It is important to recognize that
university students, even if the target audience of most media content, are not
representative of other media audiences given their middle-class positions as upwardly
mobile individuals. Data was gathered from essays, and despite intimate and
introspective, double-spaced response essays with a two page-length limit constrain
the amount or direction of self-disclosure and reflexivity. Furthermore, because researchers lack direct contact or conversations with percipients when using essay instruments, it is difficult to triangulate findings.

Another limitation worth noting is the dichotomization of the current audience into an ethnoracial majority (i.e., White) and ethnoracial minority group (i.e., non-White). Treating media audiences in such a binary manner erases the intragroup variability of ethnoracial groups and assumes a cohesive identity among ethnoracial minorities. On a related note, this study prioritized ethnicity and race and did not elaborate on the intersectional nature of identity – an understanding that ethnicity/race overlap with other social and role identities producing specific social locations (see Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013).

Future studies are encouraged to pay close attention to genre, medium type (i.e., TV, film, Youtube), realness (i.e., fictional, non-fictional, in-between), and narrative role (e.g., protagonist, secondary character) of media figures. Most media figures in this study were fictional TV characters, but some participants wrote essays exclusively with actors and reality TV stars. Media audiences could assign more symbolic weight to real personae since they are not part of a script or made-up universe, thus accountable for their actions. On the topic of media medium, movies typically have an hour-an-a-half to tell a story, while television is episodic, enabling richer and fleshed-out characters due to their longer screen time. This study did not take into account media genre in its data analysis, but it must be acknowledged that and some genres cover serious and taboo topics while others are not taken too seriously. Lastly, likability may depend on whether a media figure is a protagonist or not, because “stagnant characters are common folk that aren’t remembered, but when the lead is flat, he/she probably won’t be liked” (Devin, Black man).

**CONCLUSION**

The racialized and gendered readings in this article support the symbolic marginality faced by ethnoracial minorities and/or women onscreen. TV or film characters were not solely (dis)liked on attributes related to ethnorace and/or gender. Yet, these became meaningful affective filters when ingroup mediated characters threatened or complimented these social identities. Socio-psychological theories like social identity support this observation, suggesting that people tend to enact/adopt social identities that benefit the self-concept (Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). What this article seems to capture is the situational and shifting nature of personal and/or social identities, where audiences sort through their repertoire of political, cultural, and social experiences and chose meaningful lenses to interpret media content (Bobo, 1995; Morley, 1992). The question is not whether gender or ethnorace is more important than the other—both define the self accordingly—but we should question the manners in which popular culture makes these attractive for audiences to consume. The qualitative findings here suggest that integrating prosociality into the social identities of characters is one way of achieving audience-character likability, and audiences seem to assess television and film similarly for the inner attractiveness they possess. Whether audiences (dis)like television over film characters needs further empirical exploration, but we can expect some differences alongside ethnic and/or gender lines.
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**TELEVISION PROGRAMMES**

*Breaking Bad* (2008-2013, United States: AMC)
*Elementary* (2012—, United States: CBS)
*Grey’s Anatomy* (2005—, United States: CBS)
*King of the Hill* (1997-2010, United States: FOX)
*Modern Family*, 2009—, United States: ABC
*Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014, United States: FX)
*Teen Wolf*, 2011—, United States: MTV
*That’s So Raven* (2003-2007, United States: Disney Channel)
*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996, United States: NBC)
*The George Lopez Show* (2007-2010, United States: ABC)
*The Proud Family* (2001-2005, United States: Disney Channel)
*The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006—, United States: Bravo)
*The Walking Dead* (2010—, United States: AMC)

**FILMS**

Coppola, Sofia (2003), *Lost In Translation*, United States, Focus Features.