



# #REPRESENTATIONMATTERS

Content as a Mirror to Culture



*As creators and marketers, it's our job to amplify the voice of the consumer, particularly those that are not well-represented or heard. Now, more than ever, we realize it's time to listen more closely to the issues of underserved minorities and use these insights to develop a meaningful course of action.*

*The high level of consumer interest in diverse stories and voices surfaced very strongly in this research. We believe our insights can inspire creators and marketers to get behind stories that offer a fresh point of view and bring to light more multi-faceted identities.*

**Cindi Smith**, Vice President, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Practice, National Research Group

## Industry Luminaries



**Dr. Valerie Adams-Bass**  
Assistant Professor  
University of Virginia



**Whitney Headen**  
CEO  
19th & Park



**Dr. Dana Mastro**  
Professor  
University of California, Santa Barbara



**Dr. Julius Riles**  
Assistant Professor  
University of Missouri



**Gil L. Robertson**  
Co-Founder & President  
African American Film Critics Association



**Tirrell D. Whittley**  
Founder & CEO  
Liquid Soul



**Schuyler Bailar**  
Transgender Advocate  
and Motivational Speaker



**Louiza "Weeze" Doran**  
Anti-Racism Educator  
& Social Innovator



**National  
Research  
Group**

A STAGWELL COMPANY

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**19TH  
& PARK**



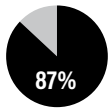


# Media has the Power to Incite Positive Change

**91%** of Americans believe content/media has the power to influence society.

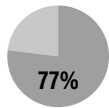
*No one believes this more strongly than Black Gen Z (97%).*

**2 in 3** Black Americans say they *don't see themselves or their culture represented on screen*

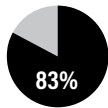


**Black Americans**

believe the way Black Americans are portrayed in media influences perceptions about them in the real world.

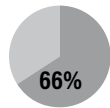


**Total**



**Black Americans**

believe Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes of Black people.



**Total**

## **Black Americans are not a monolithic group**

2 in 3 Americans across political ideologies and ethnicities think there's a need for greater representation of all groups listed:

*Black gay women*

*Black children*

*Black men with disabilities*

*Black women with disabilities*

*Any mixed race*

*Black teenagers*

*Black women*

*Black men*

*Black transgender women*

*Black non-binary or genderqueer*

*Black gay men*

*Black transgender men*

“

Being a Black person automatically means you're subjected to white supremacy and racism. Being a woman means you're subjected to misogyny and sexism. Being a trans person means you're subjected to transphobia and misogyny. You put those all together as a Black trans woman walking through the world and you have to walk through all of the worst parts of all of those things.



**Schuyler Bailar**  
*Transgender Advocate and Motivational Speaker*

Representation is not a certainty for all groups and it's not consistent across different platforms. There's a lot of nuance that must be considered. We also have to be thoughtful that Black Americans are not a monolithic group.

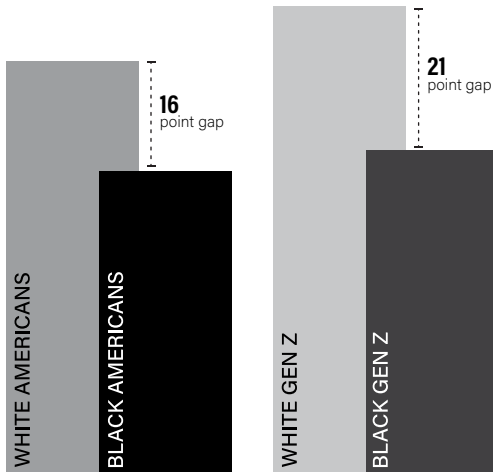


**Dr. Dana Mastro**  
*Professor, University of California, Santa Barbara*

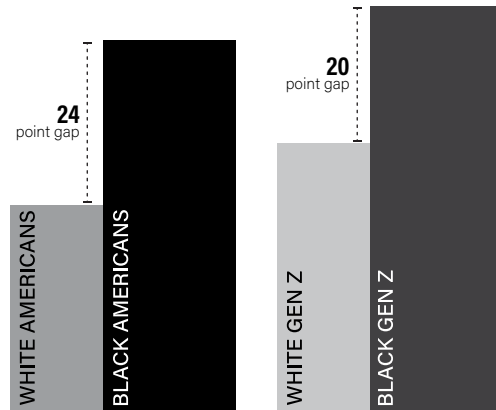
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# Sizable gaps in understanding

Most Americans **underestimate** the improvement in representation needed, compared to what Black Americans believe.



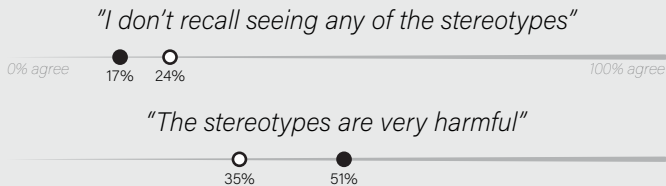
Representation of Black Americans in Hollywood **has improved a lot** since the 1960s



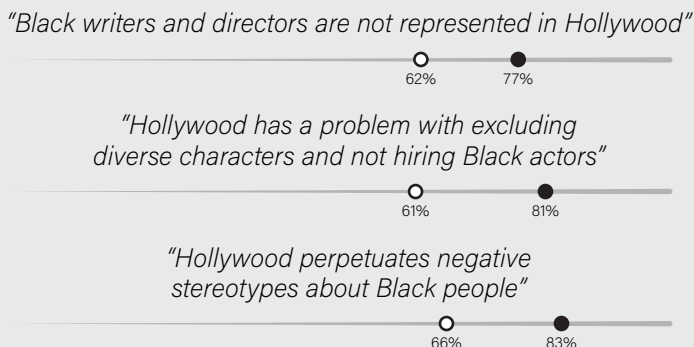
The way Black Americans are portrayed in entertainment media **influences perceptions** about them in the real world

## Blinders to remove

### Don't see the problem



### Industry reproduces problems



"Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes about Black people"

66% 83%

"We don't need white men writing for us. We need diverse people of all backgrounds and ethnicities to tell these stories."

-Female, Black, 53

### Voices aren't being heard

"It's obvious when characters of color/Black stories aren't written by people of color"

63% 79%

"It really bothers me when Black characters aren't written by Black people. It's always painfully obvious and it makes the character seem fake and inauthentic."

-Male, Black, 50

As creators, marketers and brands, how can we leverage our influence as a force for positive change?



## A KEY INFLECTION POINT:

# Recognizing the Importance of Diverse Stories

“

The fact of the matter is that films and TV shows that promote diversity and inclusivity perform well. It's time that the studio system and the stakeholders in the industry recognize that diversity sells.



**Gil Robertson**  
Co-Founder & President  
African American Film Critics Association

## Cultural diversity is a key driver for content engagement, particularly among Black Americans and Gen Z audiences

Important characteristics when choosing what to watch:

Gen Z	Total	Black Americans
Representative of different cultures or people	Makes me think	Diverse cast
+	+	+
Features complex characters of color	Tells an important story	Representative of different cultures or people
+	+	+
Teaches me something new	Authentic	Features complex characters of color
+	+	+
Has positive messaging	Opens my mind	Teaches me something new
+	+	+
Inspires or uplifts me	Creative or unconventional	Representative of people like me

**3 in 4** Americans say **content that is representative of different cultures or people** is a key factor when choosing what to watch

In addition to stories that *open my mind/make me think*, are *creative/unconventional* and *relatable*, there is sizable demand for stories that portray *nuanced, relatable, diverse characters* (driven by Black Americans) as well as stories that *bring people together, empower me* and *reflect my values* (driven by Gen Z).

**86%**

of Black Americans want to see stories that are more *representative of people like me* vs. 7 in 10 Total

I think there was a time where there were rumors that box office sales, television sales, and revenue were not attached to a Black audience. But in the last five or ten years, especially as media consumption habits have increased, we're seeing that that's not true. We're seeing that, not only do these films and TV shows do well with full audiences—they also over-index on revenue and audience sentiment.



**Whitney Headen**  
CEO, 19th & Park

”

# Demand is here—we're just waiting for the stories

Q: What content would you like to see more of in the future?

**+**  
Content with characters that break racial stereotypes

92% 82%  
Black Americans Total

**+**  
Content that features mixed-race characters or families

92% 86%

**+**  
Content that has Black characters from all types of economic backgrounds

91% 85%

**+**  
Content with Black directors or writers

91% 85%

**+**  
Content with diverse casts

90% 85%

**+**  
Content with unknown Black figures in history

90% 80%

**+**  
Content with all Black casts

90% 77%

**+**  
Content that depicts Black people in "everyday life"

88% 83%

**+**  
Content with characters that break gender stereotypes

85% 74%

What type of relationships do they want to see?

Friendships and mixed families come first, with romantic relationships proving more complex. It's not that Black Americans don't want to see it; it's that they also want to see representations of strong, positive, healthy Black romantic relationships—which they don't see often enough in media.

Black/other ethnicities (Latinx, Asian, etc.)  
+9 points ahead of interest in seeing Black/white

*"TV shows and movies focus too much on Black pain, and make every single issue or plot about race. While I agree that we should never lose touch with who we are, constantly pointing out the differences between the races only widens the chasm between us."*

-Male, Black, 51

I'm a big proponent of telling our stories. I understand people's appetite to see something fresh and new. There are a lot of narratives in our history books that have not been told.



Tirrell D. Whittley  
Founder & CEO, Liquid Soul

*"I'd like to see more Black writers and directors hired to make films of different genres, including **fantasy** and **science-fiction**."*

-Male, Black, 47

*"In movies, we are always forced to deal with race, which is not the only issue Black people face. I have yet to see a Black-led movie that has adventure, magic, or tells a coming-of-age story."*

-Female, Black, 21

# The Entire Media Ecosystem Needs to Step Up Its Representation Game

## Across the ecosystem

Americans believe addressing societal issues such as **racial equality** (77%) and **social justice** (75%) are the most important areas for improvement, **but Media isn't far behind.**

Progress in Media/Advertising and Content/Entertainment industries has been slow:

**1 in 3**  

Americans say the industries **have improved over the past 10 years**

**6 in 10** 

Americans believe the Media/Advertising industry (Advertising, Beauty/Fashion, Social Media & Tech) **needs to improve its representation of Black Americans.**

*vs. 77% of Black Americans*

**7 in 10** 

Americans think the Content/Entertainment industry (Film, TV, Music & Gaming) **needs to improve its representation of Black Americans.**

*vs. 77% of Black Americans*

*"Outreach in underserved communities would be an excellent strategy to have more diverse qualified people working with you in the future."*

-Female, Black, 24

“

Has representation improved? It's complicated. In my opinion, the good has gotten better and the bad has not. We see more portrayals of Black people in various situations, sometimes even in positions of authority... that's good. The associations of Black people with threats and gang activity...we still see that too often times in the news or in entertainment media.



Dr. Julius Riles  
Assistant Professor,  
University of Missouri

*"The tech industry and social media can't be carried by white people alone. **Include people of color in the conversations**, at the table, in the creative process. Include people of color in any and everything you can, because diversity is strength. When you have diverse voices you get diverse outcomes."*

-Female, Black, 21



# Deep dive into entertainment



## Off-screen

### Not enough Black executives or creatives in positions of power

The top most effective actions for the industry are:

+ Better distribution opportunities for Black content creators

*91% Black Americans, 82% total*

+ Specific hiring efforts for Black creatives/writers and directors

*90% Black Americans, 78% total*



## On-screen

### Black characters often represent negative stereotypes and are not made relatable enough

When it comes to the representation and inclusion of Black people in Hollywood and the media industry, **Black characters representing negative stereotypes of Black people is the top pain point among 91% of Black Americans.** The most familiar and harmful stereotypes represent broken homes, violence, addiction, rage and sexual promiscuity.



Race is often used across media as a lazy storytelling device so you don't have to give context or explain backstory, and that continues to happen.



Dr. Dana Mastro  
Professor, University of California, Santa Barbara

## Representation in TV and Movies

TV has led the way in integrating diverse stories and characters into programming. In recent years, Film has increased representation across a few experiential genres but still needs to do more to promote diversity.

BETTER IN TV ←

→ BETTER IN MOVIES



REALITY



TEEN/YA



ROMANCE



DRAMA



ACTION / ADVENTURE



HORROR



COMEDY



THRILLER / SUSPENSE / MYSTERY



CARTOON



COMIC BOOK / SUPERHERO





DISNEY/MARVEL



ABC



FOX



CW



ABC



UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

“

Out of all the movies I've seen I believe **Black Panther** has done positive representation the best. It challenged all of the usual stereotypes by showcasing Black people in empowering positions and although the cast was all Black, it didn't feel intentionally Black. **It made Black people feel proud, celebrated, and empowered watching it.**

-Female, Black, 21

## Best examples of representation and inclusion in entertainment

in recent years, and according to Black Americans



**Black Panther** 52%  
**Black-ish** 36%  
**Empire** 19%  
**Black Lightning** 17%  
**Grown-ish** 16%  
**Get Out** 15%

## What they get right

Approximately **1 in 2 Black Americans** cite character development as key to success:

- + Black characters are the focus of the story
- + Black characters are realistic
- + Black characters in roles we don't normally see Black actors in

# Empowering the Media Industry

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## EXPERT SPOTLIGHT

With creators turning to digital platforms and alternative forms of distribution...

As Black youth became more skilled using technology, they became more critical of the media they were consuming, and they began to create and tell stories from their perspectives.



Dr. Valerie Adams-Bass  
Assistant Professor, University of Virginia

These kids can create phenomenal content with an iPhone and a ring light...the threshold to create content has been greatly reduced for them.



Tirrell D. Whitley  
Founder & CEO, Liquid Soul

We're in a very unique time. People have time sitting at home. And we're living in a digital age where you can film movies on an iPhone. Gen Z is killing the game. Some of the content these kids are putting out there is blowing my mind.



Louiza "Weeze" Doran  
Anti-Racism Educator & Social Innovator

”

## Next-generation creators are taking control of their own cultural narratives, opening up a world of creativity

Gen Z recognizes the change we want to see:

90%

of Gen Z thinks **better distribution opportunities for Black content creators** will be effective for improving representation and inclusion in the entertainment industry.

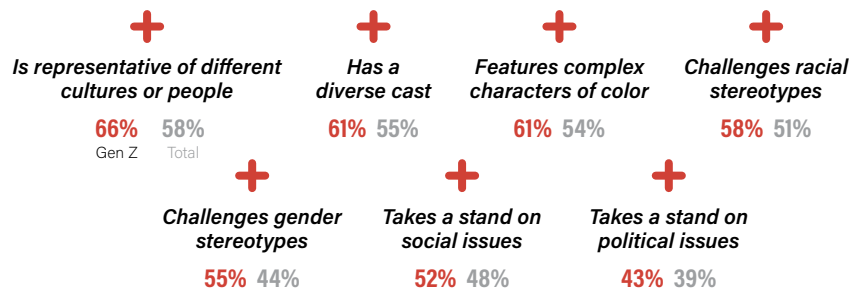
vs. 82% total

84%

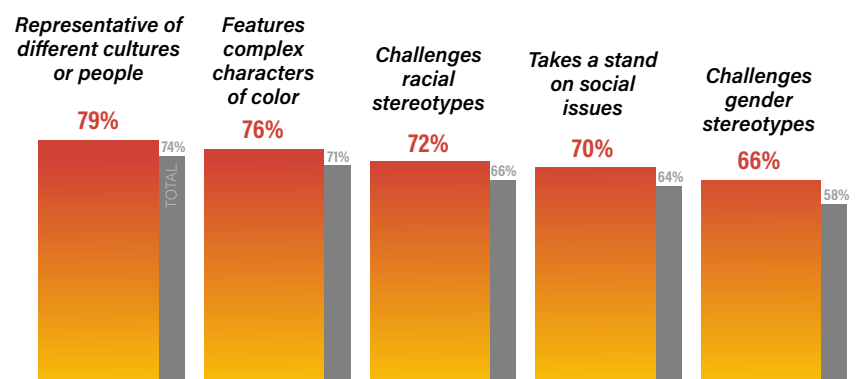
of Gen Z agrees there **isn't enough funding** for entertainment content created by Black people.

vs. 72% total

Gen Z wants to see more content in the future that:



Key characteristics for Gen Z when choosing what to watch:



“

# Black Americans' message to the media industry

*"Consult with a vast group of Black Americans for proper representation. Research, be conscious, cautious, and considerate when writing for Black characters to reduce further harm to a vulnerable and oppressed group."*

-Female, Black, 31

*"Please stop using us for diversity or for background characters. We are our own people with our own stories, not just back-up for the white people."*

-Female, Black, 20

*"Include all types of Black people, not just the Black people with lighter skin or people who fit European standards of beauty. I want to see more inclusiveness with Black people."*

-Female, Black, 24

*"Portray your characters as people, and don't be afraid to go against stereotypes. We're just as layered, unique and culturally diverse as whites. And just because something stars Black people doesn't mean it has to be about Black issues all the time. Get more diverse people behind the camera to reflect more diversity in front of it."*

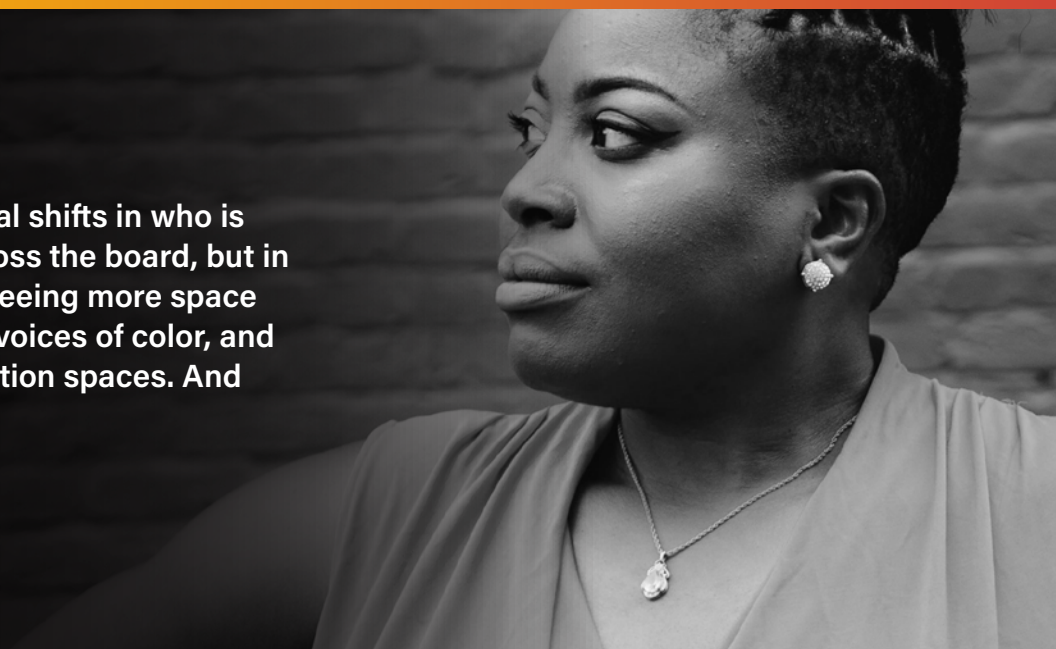
-Male, Black, 51

“

**There have been some phenomenal shifts in who is controlling the narratives. Not across the board, but in some really impactful ways. I am seeing more space being made for creatives of color, voices of color, and leadership of color in content creation spaces. And honestly, it does give me hope.**



**Louiza "Weeze" Doran**  
Anti-Racism Educator & Social Innovator





# Strategic Implications

## ***Reducing stereotypes***

### ***DON'T***

#### Reduce Black characters to stereotypes

The most familiar and harmful stereotypes represent broken homes, violence, addiction, rage and sexual promiscuity.

Stereotypical characters tend to be removed from the main action of the series, and oftentimes content creators will attempt to be more inclusive through tokenism: featuring a token minority figure in content that otherwise features no other characters that share their identity.

Minorities often feel that when members of their group are featured in the media, their stories are focused on tropes related to their identity. These portrayals and storylines have come under increased scrutiny in recent years for subtly emphasizing the ways that minorities differ from the status quo.

**4 in 5**

Black Americans think it's obvious when a character of color wasn't written by someone of that race.

### ***DO***

#### Develop complex, realistic, multi-dimensional Black characters

A positive portrayal is often created by having someone who shares the identity involved in production, designing characters seen in respected and powerful positions, and offering a fresh point of view that stems from a multi-faceted identity. Creators should not convey Black Americans as a monolithic group; a multi-faceted identity is signaled by everything from socioeconomic markers to elements of racial identity such as skin tones and hair textures.





## More diverse storytelling

### DON'T

#### Let the dominant narrative be about Black struggle

There's an abundance of both contemporary and historical stories about the struggles of the lived Black experience, and while these stories are important, they shouldn't be the only options for engaging with Black stories. It's critical that the dominant content narrative is not limited to Black struggle and pain.

### DO

#### Tell untold stories

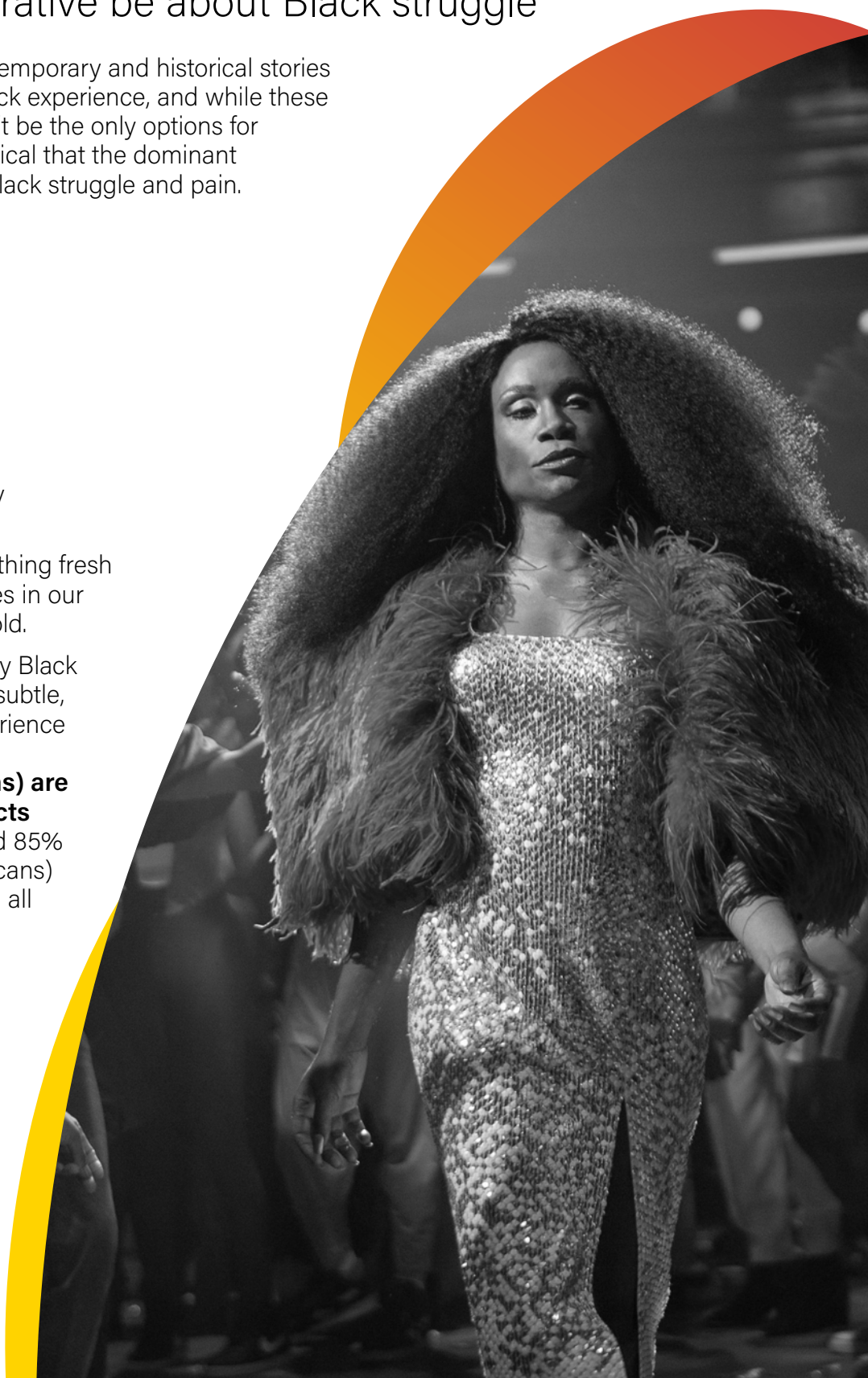
There's a desire for greater diversity in the types of story being told.

Audiences are hungry to see something fresh and new, with appetite to see stories in our history books that have not been told.

When it comes to the contemporary Black experience, audiences crave more subtle, realistic portrayals of the lived experience across many walks of life. **83% of Americans (87% Black Americans) are likely to watch content that depicts Black people in everyday life**, and 85% of all Americans (92% Black Americans) would watch Black characters from all types of economic backgrounds.

## 8 in 10

Americans, led by 88% of Black Americans, would watch content about unknown Black figures in history.



# Changing mainstream mindsets

## DON'T

### Limit the inclusion of dynamic Black characters to Black stories

One of the key problems cited when it comes to representation and inclusion of Black people in Hollywood and media is that content about Black people is always about being Black (72% Total, 79% Black Americans). **77% of Americans (70% Black Americans) agree that regardless of genre, they want to see content starring Black people where the story doesn't center around being Black.**

## DO

### Expand the audience for Black stories through out-of-the-box genres

Black Panther and Black Lightning signaled the potential for out-of-the-box genres, such as Superhero, Sci/Fi and Fantasy, to bring Black stories to the masses. Our research reveals mainstream appeal for Black content in a futuristic setting (77% Total, 85% Black Americans) or in a fantasy setting (74% Total, 86% Black Americans). **These immersive genres can inspire and empower audiences to see Black characters in a new context.**

Letitia Wright in Black Panther  
DISNEY/MARVEL



METHODOLOGY: From September 5-8, 2020, NRG conducted a nationally representative survey of n=1,388 18-54 year-old Americans who engage with TV, movies, social media, or video games frequently. NRG's consumer interviews were conducted in partnership with leading providers of market research panels, including Dynata, Prodege, Marketcube, and DISQO. NRG additionally conducted eight in-depth expert interviews with media/cultural theorists, NGOs and NPOs, and industry leaders to inform the research.

### Are you ready to up your representation game?

Our Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Practice champions shifting the narrative around what diverse audiences seek from products and services. Bringing deep expertise in cultural insights, we help clients connect with audiences across all screens, with an emphasis on the multicultural consumer. To learn more about this study or how we can help your business understand and connect with audiences, get in touch: [cindi.smith@nrgmr.com](mailto:cindi.smith@nrgmr.com)



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