

Performing Authenticity: Participatory Representation and Power in Ethnic Themed Musicals

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary musical films are now widely used to tell ethnic stories. This study examines how industry practices casting, creative participation, cultural consultation, and marketing strategies affect the authenticity and reception of ethnic representation. Four films serve as case studies: *In the Heights*, *Coco*, *Encanto*, and *West Side Story* (2021). Using comparative content analysis informed by boundary making theory and representation studies, the research analyzes production documents, promotional materials, and reception data to explore how participatory inclusion shapes narrative integrity. Methodologically, the study applies a multimodal coding framework to assess how structural dynamics influence storytelling from development through distribution. It incorporates data from creative personnel profiles, marketing discourse, and community feedback, enabling a comprehensive understanding of industry driven representation. The results reveal that films involving creators and consultants from target communities tend to offer richer, more nuanced portrayals, while those relying on symbolic inclusion or commodified authenticity risk critical backlash and community disengagement. Casting misalignments, marketing inconsistencies, and lack of structural inclusion are identified as recurring challenges. These findings highlight the need for systemic reform in media production to promote authentic and accountable ethnic storytelling. The study contributes to scholarly debates on cultural representation and offers a replicable model for evaluating equity in media narratives.

Keywords: Ethnic Representation, Musical Film, Authenticity, Media Industry, Participatory Inclusion, Boundary Making, Diversity In Media.



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INTRODUCTION

The revival of ethnic themed musical films in the 21st century is not only an aesthetic trend but also a significant shift in cultural politics within mainstream media. With global audiences expanding and demands for social justice rising, these films now reflect changing attitudes toward

diversity, inclusion, and representation. Historically, the musical film genre has been critiqued for perpetuating reductive and monolithic depictions of ethnic groups. However, contemporary entries like *Coco* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *In the Heights* (2021), and *Encanto* (2021) have demonstrated a heightened attentiveness to ethnic authenticity, signaling a paradigmatic shift in both form and function. This transition has been propelled by sociopolitical currents that challenge entrenched power hierarchies within media production and consumption. It is within this landscape that the present study locates itself, aiming to interrogate the structural mechanisms through which ethnicity is represented and negotiated in musical films.

A central concern in this study is the extent to which production and marketing decisions shape ethnic representation. Such decisions are not neutral but deeply embedded in the political economy of the cultural industries, where market demands intersect with ideological agendas. The problem at hand is thus not simply how ethnic characters are portrayed on screen, but how off screen dynamics including casting practices, creative leadership, consultation with ethnic communities, and promotional framing construct boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This approach resonates with the theoretical framework of boundary making, as advanced by Barth (1969), which posits that ethnic identities are constructed relationally, often in opposition to other groups. In the context of film, boundary making is not only evident in the textual representation but also in the industrial processes that shape what and who is visible.

Existing literature has proposed multiple frameworks to understand these dynamics. The ethnicity as performance model examines how ethnic identities are enacted through characters, mise en scène, and musical style (Sambaraju, 2021). Meanwhile, the social constructionist approach emphasizes the discursive nature of media narratives, which shape public understandings of ethnicity and cultural difference (Hennekam & Syed, 2018). Both perspectives are enriched by intersectionality theory, which considers how race, gender, and class interact to produce complex identity formations in filmic texts (Nwonka & Malik, 2018; Topaz et al., 2022). Furthermore, boundary making theory foregrounds the role of structural inequality in limiting authentic participation from marginalized communities, particularly within the Western centric frameworks of film production (Nwonka, 2020).

These theoretical insights gain empirical weight when examined alongside recent case studies. While films such as *Coco* have been widely celebrated for their cultural accuracy, achieved through extensive consultation with Mexican American communities, others have sparked controversy. For instance, *In the Heights* was simultaneously praised for its vibrant portrayal of Latinx culture and critiqued for the underrepresentation of Afro Latinx actors a tension that underscores the layered nature of intra ethnic politics. Such cases highlight the performativity of authenticity in film: it is not simply about correct representation but about inclusive structures that enable community voices to participate meaningfully in storytelling.

The structural limitations of the film industry further compound these challenges. Research has documented the persistent barriers faced by BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) professionals in accessing funding, leadership roles, and creative control (Hennekam & Syed, 2018; Nwonka, 2020). In response, institutions such as the British Film Institute have introduced diversity standards to institutionalize inclusivity, though their long term effectiveness remains

under evaluation. These dynamics reveal the contested nature of boundary making in media production, where ethnic representation is a site of both struggle and possibility.

In parallel, the commodification of authenticity in film marketing has added another layer of complexity. Studios frequently employ terms such as "authentic," "cultural celebration," or "based on true heritage" as promotional hooks, regardless of whether the creative process genuinely reflects those claims. This tactic may satisfy surface level diversity metrics while eliding deeper structural inequalities. Audience backlash against films like *The Last Airbender* and *Ghost in the Shell*, where white actors were cast in ethnically coded roles, demonstrates the growing intolerance for such dissonance between marketing rhetoric and production reality (O'Brien et al., 2017).

Amidst these controversies, the impact of ethnic themed musical films on cultural identity and perception remains significant. Ethnic narratives, when executed with depth and authenticity, foster empathy and understanding across cultural boundaries. They offer minority audiences an opportunity for self recognition and cultural affirmation, counteracting histories of misrepresentation. Films like *Black Panther* and *Encanto* have been noted not only for their box office success but also for their symbolic resonance within communities seeking visibility and dignity (Duche, 2023; Quadros, 2023).

This study, therefore, aims to examine the mechanisms of ethnic boundary making in musical films from a structural perspective. It will assess how casting, creative leadership, consultation, and marketing influence the authenticity and reception of ethnic representation. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of media production analysis with cultural theory, applying a multimodal coding framework to empirically ground theoretical claims. By doing so, it offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand how inclusion operates or fails to operate within the contemporary cinematic landscape.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study design, selecting four ethnic themed musical films to explore how industry practices shape ethnic boundary making. It combines media analysis with a critical cultural framework, drawing on recent scholarship about authenticity, representation, and production ethics.

Case Selection Criteria

The films selected for this study *In the Heights* (2021), *West Side Story* (2021), *Coco* (2017), and *Encanto* (2021) were chosen using purposive sampling based on their ethnic thematic focus, global reach, and public discourse surrounding representation. As recommended by comparative media scholars, cases were selected for their variability across regional, cultural, and industrial contexts (Nwonka, 2020; Topaz et al., 2022). Each case exhibits contextual significance, allowing for the exploration of socio political dynamics embedded in both production and reception environments (Sambaraju, 2021).

Operationalization of Key Concepts

"Authenticity" is defined in this study as the degree to which cultural representation aligns with lived experiences and community narratives. Operational markers include the use of culturally specific practices, language use, and character agency as portrayed through narrative and musical content (Kagan et al., 2022).

"Representation" is evaluated through the visibility and complexity of ethnic characters, creative leadership, and consultation processes. Using semiotic and narrative analysis, the study identifies how ethnic identities are constructed and problematized in each film (Topaz et al., 2022; Hennekam & Syed, 2018). Audience perceptions of authenticity are also assessed via critical and community response data (O'Brien et al., 2017; Ouanhlee, 2024).

Data Collection and Triangulation

Three types of data are triangulated to ensure methodological robustness:

- Production Data: Studio records, interviews with directors/writers, production notes.
- Marketing Strategies: Trailers, press kits, media campaigns, and paratextual materials.
- Reception Data: Critical reviews, social media discourse, and scholarly commentary.

Mixed methods integration allows for a holistic understanding of each film's lifecycle from development to audience interpretation and ensures the empirical grounding of theoretical claims (Quadros, 2023).

Longitudinal and Ethical Considerations

This study incorporates longitudinal analysis by tracking changes in production narratives and audience feedback across time, thereby revealing the evolving dynamics of representation and industry response to critique (Topaz et al., 2022; Nwonka, 2020).

Ethical research practice is maintained through adherence to transparency, inclusivity, and consent protocols. Participatory sensitivity is applied when interpreting community based responses, especially in social media discourse, where representational stakes are high (Duche, 2023; Quadros, 2023). This approach ensures the study is accountable to the very communities it seeks to represent.

In sum, this methodological framework enables a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of how musical films operationalize ethnic boundaries within cultural, industrial, and ethical dimensions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Casting Structures (I1)

Patterns of Casting Misrepresentation

Casting misalignment is a recurring issue in ethnic themed musicals. Roles intended for specific ethnic backgrounds are often given to actors without matching heritage, reducing authenticity (Hennekam & Syed, 2018; Topaz et al., 2022). Films such as *In the Heights* and *The Greatest Showman* faced criticism for sidelining Afro Latinx and other underrepresented groups in favor of more ‘marketable’ profiles (Nwonka, 2020).

Actor Ethnicity Alignment and Perceived Authenticity

Audience perceptions of authenticity are closely tied to casting decisions. When actors authentically reflect the cultural backgrounds of their characters, films like *Coco* benefit from elevated audience trust and approval (Sambaraju, 2021; Duche, 2023). Conversely, misaligned casting is often perceived as disingenuous and alienating (Topaz et al., 2022).

Intra Ethnic Diversity and Omission

Despite increasing diversity on screen, intra ethnic complexities, such as Afro Latinx representation, are often glossed over. Case studies show persistent industry resistance to embracing such nuanced identities (Hennekam & Syed, 2018; Nwonka, 2020).

Impact of Casting Controversies

Casting related controversies frequently result in community backlash and media critique. Instances like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Aloha* serve as cautionary tales, where whitewashing and erasure led to protests and reputational damage (Nwonka & Malik, 2018; O’Brien et al., 2017).

Creative Participation (I2 & I3)

Role of Cultural Consultants

Cultural consultants ensure respectful and accurate portrayals, advising on everything from language to rituals. Their integration into production, as seen in *Moana* and *Coco*, fosters authenticity (Kagan et al., 2022; Hennekam & Syed, 2018).

Influence of Creative Backgrounds

Narrative authenticity is often enhanced when directors and writers come from the communities they portray. Lin Manuel Miranda’s work on *In the Heights* exemplifies this, while outsider led projects face increased skepticism (Duche, 2023; Sambaraju, 2021).

Community Rooted vs. External Creators

Research shows that films with community embedded creators achieve higher resonance among audiences due to nuanced storytelling and lived experience perspectives (Topaz et al., 2022).

Evaluating Cultural Collaboration

Effective models of collaboration include frameworks assessing ethnic representation in leadership, consultation scope, and post release community feedback (Nwonka & Malik, 2018; Nwonka, 2020).

Marketing Framing (I4)

Authenticity as Branding

Studios market ethnic films using “authenticity” as a central hook, often featuring culturally tailored visuals and community partnerships. *Coco*’s promotional campaign exemplifies successful branding through cultural engagement (Duche, 2023).

Marketing and Audience Expectations

Discrepancies between marketing rhetoric and on screen reality can alienate audiences. If cultural authenticity is promised but not delivered, backlash ensues (Topaz et al., 2022).

Paratextual Representation

Trailers, posters, and merch function as symbolic representations of ethnic communities. Their alignment with cultural values strongly influences reception (Hennekam & Syed, 2018; Sambaraju, 2021).

Marketing Language and Box Office Impact

Campaigns emphasizing personal narratives and multicultural appeal generally achieve better box office outcomes. *Coco* and *Encanto* leveraged this approach effectively (Kagan et al., 2022; Topaz et al., 2022).

Reception Dynamics (I5)

Measuring Reception

Community reception is captured via surveys, focus groups, and social media tracking. Critical reception is gauged through reviews and critic aggregators (Duche, 2023; Nwonka, 2020).

Tokenism vs. Structural Inclusion

Audiences differentiate between token presence and structural inclusion. The latter generates higher satisfaction and perceived respect (Topaz et al., 2022).

Examples of Backlash

Films such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Aloha* sparked widespread discontent over racial misrepresentation. Such cases underscore the importance of authentic casting and narrative control (Hennekam & Syed, 2018; Duche, 2023).

Social Media's Role

Social media amplifies underrepresented voices, transforming discourse on representation. It pressures studios into accountability and influences future casting decisions (Nwonka, 2020).

In sum, these results underscore how the structures of casting, creative leadership, marketing, and audience interaction profoundly shape the trajectory and impact of ethnic representation in musical films. By triangulating these data sources, the study illuminates both progress and persistent gaps in industry practices.

Commodified Authenticity and Narrative Integrity

This study shows that ethnic representation in musical films is deeply shaped by industry practices influencing both narratives and reception. A key issue is commodified authenticity the strategic use of cultural symbols to market films under the appearance of genuine representation. While this branding may momentarily attract audiences and generate market enthusiasm, it frequently undermines the narrative's integrity by flattening complex cultural realities into palatable fragments for mainstream consumption.

Films that superficially incorporate cultural themes to align with audience expectations risk reducing ethnic identity to a marketable aesthetic rather than portraying it as a dynamic and lived experience rooted in specific histories and communities (Jackson-Brown, 2020; Tsai et al., 2020). This phenomenon is not limited to content but extends into casting choices, music selection, and set design each potentially manipulated for commodified appeal. As Leap & Heath (2020) argue, such commodification often leads to perceptions of disingenuousness, diminishing audience engagement, undermining trust in media institutions, and diluting the film's cultural relevance. When audiences from the represented communities perceive this gap, the outcome is often disappointment or backlash, which in turn pressures filmmakers to re examine the trade offs between commercial viability and cultural responsibility.

Risks of Symbolic Inclusion Without Structural Reform

Closely linked to commodification is the increasingly prevalent practice of symbolic inclusion, wherein racially and ethnically diverse characters are presented onscreen without corresponding shifts in the power structures that shape narrative content. While visual diversity may be achieved through casting, the persistence of majority control over production, writing, direction, and financing significantly limits the authenticity and depth of representation (Antunes & Simões, 2023; Malik et al., 2017).

Such symbolic gestures can often mask underlying inequalities, projecting an image of inclusivity without enabling the voices of underrepresented groups to meaningfully influence story development. These superficial gestures, although sometimes well intentioned, may in fact perpetuate a form of cultural tokenism that fails to challenge the industry's structural status quo. Audiences, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are increasingly critical of such performative diversity. As Ismail et al. (2020) suggest, the disparity between visible diversity and behind the scenes decision making power can foster disillusionment, erode audience trust, and reduce long term cultural engagement with these narratives.

Power Asymmetries in Ethnic Storytelling

These dynamics underscore the enduring power asymmetries embedded within the landscape of ethnic storytelling in mainstream cinema. Narrative authority defined as the power to shape and disseminate stories remains disproportionately concentrated among dominant cultural groups. As a result, ethnic minority narratives are often filtered through externally imposed frameworks that fail to capture the nuances of lived experience (Manzo et al., 2019).

Even when ethnic characters are present, their complexity is frequently subordinated to the demands of audience accessibility or market logic, resulting in reductive portrayals that align with preexisting stereotypes or oversimplified tropes (Campbell, 2022; Kox et al., 2022). These asymmetries not only affect how stories are told but also who is allowed to tell them, limiting opportunities for community based storytellers to contribute meaningfully to cultural production. The long term impact of these representational constraints includes the reinforcement of societal misconceptions, the erasure of intra group diversity, and the perpetuation of hegemonic norms through cultural media (Zibaei, 2021).

Frameworks for Participatory Representation in Mainstream Media

Addressing these imbalances requires the deliberate adoption and institutionalization of participatory frameworks in media production. Such frameworks promote collaborative authorship and decentralize creative control, allowing for more equitable and representative storytelling processes. As Rahim et al. (2024) highlight, participatory models that integrate community stakeholders from concept development through post production can transform the representational landscape of mainstream media.

Citizen journalism and community media offer valuable prototypes, demonstrating how direct involvement from marginalized voices can yield narratives that challenge dominant ideologies and reflect complex, grounded experiences (Holt, 2018). In the context of feature film production, this approach can take the form of inclusive writers' rooms, advisory boards made up of cultural experts, or revenue sharing agreements with communities whose stories are featured (Campbell & McFarlane, 2022). However, for these practices to be effective, they must be embedded within institutional mandates and protected from dilution by market pressures. Without structural commitment, participatory representation risks becoming another form of symbolic inclusion, replicating rather than redressing existing inequalities (Antunes & Simões, 2023).

Toward Accountable Ethnic Representation

The intersection of commodified authenticity, symbolic inclusion, and structural inequality ultimately raises essential questions about accountability in ethnic representation. For filmmakers, media executives, and cultural institutions, this necessitates a shift from performative gestures toward actionable, sustained reform. Moving beyond cosmetic forms of diversity means rethinking the infrastructure of media production how decisions are made, who makes them, and whose interests they serve.

Genuine representation must begin at the foundational levels of creative development, including the recruitment and empowerment of diverse voices in leadership positions. It must persist through all stages of the filmmaking process, from scriptwriting and casting to marketing and

critical discourse. Furthermore, it requires mechanisms of feedback and accountability, wherein audiences and cultural stakeholders are invited not only to consume but also to critique and shape the narratives that claim to represent them.

Only through such comprehensive and ongoing engagement can ethnic storytelling evolve from its current state of selective inclusion toward a more equitable, culturally grounded, and community driven media ecosystem. In doing so, filmmakers will not only achieve greater narrative authenticity but also foster long term trust, resonance, and relevance among the increasingly diverse audiences they seek to reach.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how casting, creative participation, cultural consultation, and marketing strategies shape ethnic representation in contemporary musical films. Through a comparative analysis of *In the Heights*, *Coco*, *Encanto*, and *West Side Story* (2021), the findings show that meaningful collaboration with ethnic communities strengthens authenticity and audience trust, while symbolic inclusion or commodified authenticity often leads to criticism and disengagement.

Overall, the research highlights the importance of moving beyond surface-level diversity toward structural reform in media production. Genuine representation requires sustained inclusion of diverse voices in leadership, creative processes, and promotional strategies. By embedding participatory frameworks and accountability measures, filmmakers and studios can create narratives that are not only more authentic but also resonate deeply with increasingly diverse global audiences.

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