Changing faces on children’s cable programming: the emergence of racial and ethnic minorities as lead characters on Nickelodeon and Disney Channel 1996-2005

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Abstract
Although children’s programming has been considered to be at the forefront of incorporating racial and ethnic diversity, the roles on television for racial and ethnic minorities have continued to be limited or based on stereotypes, and sheer presence in numbers for non-whites is still lacking in comparison to white characters. Television programming during the 1990s and early 2000s became a key period in history for racial and ethnic representation, as programming as a whole reflected a greater non-white presence than ever before, with children’s programming as no exception. This thesis focuses on how race and ethnicity were depicted on the children’s cable networks Nickelodeon and Disney Channel during this time period. My study focuses on three programs, The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo (Nickelodeon, 1996-1998), Taina (Nickelodeon, 2001-2002), and The Proud Family (Disney Channel, 2001-2005), all of which placed racial and ethnic minorities as lead characters, diverging from the standard in casting for children’s television programs. In observing whether these programs portrayed race in an assimilationist, color/culture conscious, or post-racial manner, my study provides insight into the overarching narrative constructed about race and ethnicity for youth viewing two of television’s most successful networks committed to programming for kids in this time period.

Department
Radio-Television-Film

Description
text

Subject
Nickelodeon
Disney Channel
Race
Ethnicity
Children's television
Taina
The Proud Family
The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo
The physical separation of racial and ethnic groups reappearing after a period of relative integration. Term. Fusion. Definition. A minority and a majority group combining to form a new group. Term. Amalgamation. Definition. The process by which a dominant group and a subordinate group combine through intermarriage to form a new group. Term. Melting Pot. Definition. Diverse racial or ethnic groups or both, forming a new creation, a new cultural entity. Mutual respect between the various groups in a society for one another's cultures, allowing minorities to express their own culture without experiencing prejudice or hostility. Term. Panethnicity. Definition. The development of solidarity between ethnic subgroups, as reflected in the terms Hispanic or Asian American. Term. Marginality. Definition. Identity functions of racial and ethnic conflicts. Even when ethnic or racial identities no longer serve as a basis for group cohesion, they may continue to make individuals feel special and part of a community (Waters, 1990). This can lead to racial and ethnic conflicts, which can help establish an alternative sense of identity within the school. Often minority students are assigned inferior status in the formal school structure (i.e., they are tracked into lower level courses or groups). Additionally, ethnic boundaries may be more or less important depending on the school context, income and age of the student, and social and economic conditions in the larger society. Screening Gender on Children's Television also explores how children's television producers struggle to portray issues such as sex/sexuality and the preservation of local cultures in a profit-driven market which continually strives to reinforce gender segregation. The author documents pro-active attempts by producers to advance social change, illustrating how television can serve to provide positive, empowering images for children around the world. Media play an important role in perpetuating racial and gender stereotypes that harm the self-esteem and self-concept of marginalized youth, especially for Latino/a youth in the US context. “Dora the Explorer” is a highly successful animated program on Nickelodeon.