

“OUR SKIN COLOUR IS NOT A WEAPON”

Exploring interpretations of black identity in the series *Dear White People*

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen an increase in black and other minority representation on film and television. Critical and commercial successes of minority-led content, such as *Black Panther* (2018) and *Atlanta* (2016-), indicate that the world and the American entertainment industries are changing. Progress is being made in terms of diversity and inclusivity. Paradoxically, content with non-traditional leads (e.g. black, female, homosexual) is experiencing increasing levels of hatred, online trolling, and backlash from certain people. The acclaimed Netflix show *Dear White People* (2017-), one target of said hostility, tackles the current antagonistic climate with biting satire whilst boasting a truly diverse representation of blackness.

The series addresses sensitive topics such as race relations, discrimination, and black minority experiences. Responses and interpretations of the show are bound to differ as variations in experience, knowledge, and cultural capital affect the meaning-making processes of audiences. The greater the variations, the larger the differences in interpretations as is evident from the widely diverging reactions to the show. To gain more understanding of these conflicting responses, this study explores the meaning-making processes of white, black, and other minority audiences in relation to the show. Thus, the research question is: *How do audiences respond to and interpret the representation of black identity in the series Dear White People (2017-)?*

The study is conducted in the Netherlands. As such, it adds a unique contribution to academia since most representation literature focuses on countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Moreover, the country's rich ethnic and cultural diversity ensures that the show's themes resonate with its citizens. The research employs qualitative research techniques. Focus groups and interviews are used to collect the data. Hereafter, thematic content analysis is executed with the help of ATLAS.ti. The analysis reveals that the three groups' (i.e. white, black, and other minority) responses and interpretations differ quite clearly. Most black persons empathise with the black characters and their experiences. Other minority persons also relate, to a great extent, with the black characters' journeys. White persons are more mixed: most respond sympathetically. None, however, can relate to the black characters. Some white persons also misinterpret the series' message. However, white persons that have seen the whole show display more awareness and understanding of issues such as discrimination. As such, the findings indicate that the series holds potential in cultivating more support and compassion for problems plaguing black and other minority communities. The results also indicate that the series can boost the confidence of persons from said communities.

KEYWORDS: *Representation, Blackness, Identity, Audiences, Netflix*

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1. Introduction

The film and television industry in the United States of America has come under scrutiny in recent years for its problematic relationship with minorities (Lang, 2018). Ever since the inception of audio-visual entertainment, the African American community, in particular, has been underrepresented, misrepresented, and relegated to supporting roles (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a; Hunt, Ramón, & Tran, 2019). On top of that, they have been subjected to a number of negative depictions. In recent years, however, onscreen representation of minorities has changed. In the 2016-2017 television season¹, 36.7% of characters in scripted shows were portrayed by people of colour on broadcast television (Hunt et al., 2019). As for cable and digital television, they averaged 28.2% and 29.7%, respectively. Comparing that to the 2013-2014 season where persons of colour averaged 21.0%, displays that improvements were made (Hunt, Ramón, & Tran, 2016). Despite the progress, onscreen representation is not yet proportional given that the United States has close to a 40% non-white populace (Hunt et al., 2019). Furthermore, people of colour are predominantly relegated to the background, which illustrates that minority leads are still deemed riskier by television executives (Fuller, 2010). In fact, persons of colour merely occupied between 21.3% and 21.5% of leading roles in the 2016-2017 season depending on the platform, i.e. broadcast, cable, or digital (Hunt et al., 2019).

Another well-known representation problem is stereotyping (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Black people, for instance, are disproportionately depicted as criminals, violent, irrational, or in an underclass setting (Brown, 2016). Such longstanding tropes and portrayals have several negative real-life consequences. For instance, extended exposure increases biases against black minorities and decreases self-esteem among black minority youths (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014; Baynes, 2003; Ford, 1997; Ward, 2004). Thus, such negative portrayals help perpetuate discrimination and inequality in society (Baynes, 2003). Therefore, despite the improvements that have been made over the past few decades, the television and film industries remain difficult spaces for people of colour.

Recent years, however, have seen increasing critiques about diversity, inequality, and other intersecting topics. These have led to changes in the entertainment industries. Movements such as #OscarsSoWhite, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter have called out a vast range of issues (Giroux, 2012; Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Nguyen, 2015; Obasogie & Newman, 2016). Not only within the entertainment industries but also within news media and society at large. In the meantime, the country has transitioned from Barack Obama, the first African American president, to Donald Trump, a divisive and controversial figure (Love, 2017). These developments have heavily contributed to socio-cultural changes that have resulted in increased attention for diversity: both in front and behind the camera; in the stories that are being told and by whom they are being told; and in a re-evaluation of discourses about audience tastes (Love, 2017; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). Simultaneously, these developments have mainstreamed matters such as identity politics, privilege, troll

¹ Numbers from more recent television seasons are not yet available as of the 1st of May 2020.

culture and, in turn, have heavily divided, not just the political landscape, but also mainstream society (Gusterson, 2017; Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019; Wilson, 2019).

The creation of the Netflix series *Dear White People* (2017-) coincided with these social, cultural, and political changes (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018; Wilson, 2019). Not only is it heavily informed by these developments, but it is also informative of the effects that these changes have on the world. In essence, the series is an adaptation of a 2014 movie bearing the same name. It follows the lives of several university students as they attempt to fully realise their identities in a heavily politicised, divided, and white-dominant society. Politics of race, gender, sexuality, privilege, and power influence the lives of these predominantly African American students. Through these students, the series addresses and satirises modern-day race relations in the so-called “post-racial” America. In doing so, it has received widespread critical acclaim for its unapologetic depiction of blackness, its diverse portrayal of black identity, and its smart, satirical, and subversive storytelling (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018; Wilson, 2019).

Moreover, *Dear White People* (2017-) subverts the classical distribution of roles with its main cast consisting of six black leads and one white lead. Despite the critical praise, the series has garnered a fierce and vocal backlash from certain groups. The backlash ranges from calling the show “left-wing propaganda” to proclaiming the show to be “anti-white” (Ugwu, 2018). Evidently, these reactions are reflective of the current political landscape. Other predominantly black entertainment such as *Moonlight* (2016), *Get Out* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018), have been met with similar opposition. As Justin Simien, creator of *Dear White People* (2017-), noted: “The backlash stuff was really interesting to me. They were so organized and they didn't just come after us, they came after anything black - there were campaigns against ‘Black Panther,’ too” (Ugwu, 2018).

It seems that modern society is at odds with itself. Progress is observable in numerous shapes: the United States has elected their first African American president; minorities have more means of expression than ever; and the recent critical and commercial successes of majority black movies like *Black Panther* (2018) and *Moonlight* (2016) and series such as *Dear White People* (2017-), which are also largely made by black people, seem to hint at an unprecedented era of diversity and equality (Carney, 2016; Love, 2017). Simultaneously, however, black-led and female-led films and series are experiencing online trolling, hatred, and backlash from certain white, overwhelmingly male, groups (Buckley, 2019; Salam, 2019). On top of that, the world is seeing a rise in authoritarianism, minority rights are getting endangered, and white nationalists and racists are marching out in the open again (Gusterson, 2017; Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2019).

These contradictory developments make *Dear White People* (2017-) such a fascinating series to study. Not only does it present a rare deviation in terms of representation, but it also tackles the current socio-cultural climate and developments with sharp satirical writing. In doing so, it has placed itself in the centre of the current socio-political divide and has been met with both praise and hatred. For these reasons, this study

examines in several ways how people make sense of the show and its themes. The research question, thus, is: *How do audiences respond to and interpret the representation of black identity in the series Dear White People (2017-)?*

Representation and meaning-making processes have been a point of contention for several decades (Beltrán, 2018). Various international scholars emphasise the multiple readings of a text as well as the wide range of negative effects that mis- and underrepresentation have on society (Campbell, 2016a, 2016b; Fujioka, 2005; Hall, 2012; Mastro, 2017; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Ramasubramanian, 2011b; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019). Others note how an effective use of mediated representations can help undo those negative effects by transforming audiences' stereotypical and biased views (Ramasubramanian, 2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2015; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). As such, the present study not only neatly fits in with previous academic literature, but it also aims to expand it by offering theoretical insights to the understanding of how people in a multicultural society respond to and make sense of a show that is recent, fresh, and vocal about black minority issues. Particularly, the empirical study takes place in the Netherlands. The country provides for a unique context due to its diverse nature: almost one out of four persons has a migration background (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). By interviewing people from different backgrounds, this study aims to identify the various interpretations of *Dear White People (2017-)* and gain insight into what people in the Netherlands think, feel, and know about representation and racial (in)equality. Furthermore, this study offers a unique contribution to academia by focusing on the Netherlands since most studies on race and media focus on countries like the United States or the United Kingdom.

Debates about social injustices have become more and more prominent in modern society. In the Netherlands, specifically, recent debates around its heritage, its role in slavery, and the cultural symbol of *Zwarte Piet* illustrate a certain discord and lack of understanding of the black (minority) experience. Polls, for instance, showcase that 17% of the populace does not think *Zwarte Piet*, an annually recurring blackface symbol, is racist whilst 73% of black people in the Netherlands do think it is (Van Vliet & Kester, 2018). As such, this show's themes are not only of relevance for the United States but also for the Netherlands. Social relevance of this paper, therefore, partly lies in its aims to make sense of meaning-making processes of people from various backgrounds. Relevance is also found in studying the potential benefits for multicultural societies that shows like *Dear White People (2017-)* can have. Social institutions and content creators that aim to create a cultural product that resonates with minorities, increases their self-esteem, diminishes biases and prejudices against them, and fosters more widespread understanding for minority issues, can let this study's findings inform their choices when producing new content. The focus on this series is especially relevant as the show attempts to do all of the former (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018).

As for the research methods, qualitative research techniques were employed to both collect and analyse data. A mixed-methods data gathering approach, consisting of three focus group sessions and six semi-structured in-depth interviews, was used. The data arising from the focus groups and interviews was

rigorously studied with the use of ATLAS.ti. by following an inductive approach to thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter introduces the theoretical framework of this study. The first part examines racial identity manifestation, the harms of racialisation, and how mass media contributes to both processes. The second part reviews mediated representations of black people. The third part focuses on the topics of reception and interpretation of media texts. Herein, meaning-making processes of audiences are discussed, which is followed by an examination of literature on the consequences of media exposure to mediated representation. As such, the theoretical framework helps contextualise *Dear White People* (2017-) and provides a theoretical basis to study and understand people's responses to the series.

Next, the methodology chapter provides a justification for the use of a mixed-methods approach to gather the data and the use of thematic content analysis to study the data. Herein, all the steps taken in this research are explained in great detail. The subsequent chapter presents and discusses the results from the focus groups and interviews in separate sections. This includes an analysis of how people from different backgrounds respond to and make sense of the series. Finally, the last chapter brings together the findings from both data gathering methods to present a complete picture of the meaning-making processes.

2. Theoretical framework

The present study follows in the footsteps of a broad range of media studies. In particular, literature related to representation and reception studies is explored to answer the research question. Several relevant concepts arise from these studies which are presented in the following sections. The first section introduces the intersecting concepts of identity and race. The second section tackles mediated representations of black people. The third section examines the reception and interpretation of media texts. Hereafter, an overarching conclusion is provided, and a link is set up with the present study of *Dear White People* (2017-).

2.1. Identity and race

Identity is a major topic in fields such as psychology, sociology, media studies, and organisation studies (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Deaux, 1993). It refers to the qualities that make a person or group and, implicitly, to what makes them different from others (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Deaux, 1993; Fujioka, 2005). In other words, identity is that what answers the questions “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” and, therefore, also addresses the questions “How should I act?” or “How should we act?” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 6; Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012; Cerulo, 1997).

Several individual and collective socialisation processes are responsible for the formation of identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In terms of individual factors, it refers to one’s personal experiences in life that form who one is. In terms of collective factors, it refers to social elements such as gender and race that influence and define part of one's identity and one's identification with a group of people (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Cerulo, 1997; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Deaux, 1993; Fujioka, 2005; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). It is important to note that identity is not comprised of one single element but is a mixture of several influences such as ethnicity and sexuality (Beech et al., 2012; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Cerulo, 1997; Deaux, 1993). Belonging and identification with, for instance, a gender or race, is shaped through self-identification and social identification (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Deaux, 1993; Hogg, Abrams, & Brewer, 2017; Simon & Stürmer, 2003).

The different elements of identity are used by people to make sense of the world and, as pertaining to this research, of the media. More specifically, people use their various identities “as frames of reference, as resources for understanding media, and as mediators of media content” (La Pastina, Straubhaar, & Sifuentes, 2014, p. 112). For example, a black woman can use her gender identity as a point of reference to recognise sexism and, in another instance, use her racial identity to recognise racism. For the research at hand, the focus lies on one specific part of identity, namely racial identity which is discussed below.

2.1.1. Meaning(s) of race

Race is a complex and context-dependent concept whose meanings have been derived from both biological and social dimensions (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Markus, 2008; Saenz &

Morales, 2019; Shih, Wilton, Does, Goodale, & Sanchez, 2019). Biologically derived meanings generally focus on physical features, character traits, and gene pools to categorise groups of people (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Markus, 2008; Saenz & Morales, 2019; Shih et al., 2019). In the past, Europeans used features such as intelligence, physical ability, and moral quality to distinguish between Caucasians, Asians, Native Americans, and Africans. These groups were placed, in said order, on a hierarchical ladder of racial superiority. Evidently, these biologically derived meanings have widely lost value given their discriminatory nature and, as such, the concept of race is “widely discredited as a category” (Litter, 2008, p. 89).

Modern definitions move away from biological dimensions to focus on social dimensions (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Markus, 2008; Saenz & Morales, 2019; Shih et al., 2019). Modern interpretations treat race as a social construction that “refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1993, p. 3, as cited in Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). Of note is that, given its racist origin, some prefer using the term ethnicity (Litter, 2008). Yet, the fictional concept of race remains important to study given that its legacy continues to shape our modern society (Litter, 2008). In fact, imperfect classifiers such as skin colour and facial features are still utilised to discern between people deemed racially different (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Deaux, 1993; Hogg et al., 2017). The notion is that surface-level manifestations reveal a shared heritage and shared life experiences. For example, a black person in America is presumed to have African ancestry and to have experiences that are unique to his/her racial identity, such as American anti-black discrimination.

Race remains a difficult concept given its dynamicity and fluidity: its meanings differ based on time, place, and situation (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Markus, 2008; Saenz & Morales, 2019; Shih et al., 2019). For example, the official census of the U.S. recognises five races, which are inspired by ancestry, whilst Brazil has more than 140 racial classifications, which are more so related to class (Saenz & Morales, 2019). The intricacy of the concept is further complicated by the fact that, in some countries such as France, the very notion of race is heavily rejected and tabooed (Piser, 2018). At the same time, in countries such as the U.S., it is embraced, discussed, and widely used as a tool for social understanding (Piser, 2018). Simultaneously, there are differences between the concept of race and the practice of *racialisation* (Garner & Selod, 2014; Koning, 2016; Meer, 2013; Moosavi, 2015). The latter refers to the processes of *grouping*, *othering*, and *problematizing* a people based on their unique characteristics, whether that be cultural, physical, or religious characteristics. For example, Italian and Irish immigrants in the United States were once racialised and, thus, grouped, othered, and problematised due to their distinct features and their cultural difference to mainstream society (Saenz & Morales, 2019). Over time, however, these groups assimilated into mainstream society. In other words, their differences with majority (white) America were initially problematised before their unique characteristics diminished. As such, the groups could assimilate into the majority (white) populace. Of note,

however, is that this process was facilitated due to their white skin colour, which made it easier for them to diminish their (visible) differences and assimilate than, for instance, for the African Americans (Saenz & Morales, 2019).

The aforementioned racialisation of a people has many consequences for how one's life develops and how one is treated within society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Markus, 2008; Saenz & Morales, 2019; Shih et al., 2019). Racialisation affects people because specific ideas, discourses, and expectations get allocated to racialised groups which, in turn, affects their treatment by others (Campbell, 2016b). For instance, one can look at the generally unfavourable perception and treatment of black people in the U.S. to see the consequences of this process (Campbell, 2016b; Fujioka, 2005).

In the frame of this study, race is understood as a social construct that is used to group people based on presumed heritage and shared (racial) experiences. Particularly, race refers to the version of the concept which focuses on ancestry and physical features such as skin colour. More specifically, a distinction is made between (i) white people, referring to the majority populace in the West with Caucasian/European origins; (ii) black people, referring to the minority population in the West with Sub-Saharan African origins; and (iii) other minority people, referring to all other minorities in the West that do not fit into the previous two categories (e.g. people with Arab or Asian ancestry). This category also includes ethnic and religious minorities in case they deviate from mainstream whiteness. For instance, Muslims are also racialised and, thus, othered and problematised in the West (Garner & Selod, 2014; Koning, 2016; Mahamdallie, 2015; Meer, 2013; Moosavi, 2015; Silva, 2017).

2.1.2. Racial identity in Western society

Racial identity is an especially critical and contested part within the framework of identity, formed through several socialisation processes. This identity is based on group identification and is developed through both personal and mediated experiences (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Cerulo, 1997; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Deaux, 1993; Fujioka, 2005; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). People learn about themselves through interactions, appraisals, and responses from other people. Whereas family members and friends inform one on a personal level, (mass) media informs one's identity on a broad, generalised level (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Inoue, 2005; Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009; Stroman, 1991). On a group-based level, mainstream media takes the responsibility to educate people about the social structure that they live in, where racial groups stand in this structure, and what society generally thinks about certain minority groups (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Inoue, 2004; Lee et al., 2009; Stroman, 1991).

Racial identity plays an integral part in one's development. This part of one's identity manifests in very *conscious* ways within black and other minorities and strongly informs their individual and collective identity (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Ford, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Stroman, 1991). Two social and cultural factors are primarily responsible for this conscious manifestation (Adams-Bass et al., 2014;

Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Ford, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Stroman, 1991). The first factor is the conscious engagement with traditions and values, which result in a positive response to one's own racial identity. For instance, neighbourhood, educational, and religious communities increase engagement with, awareness of, and confidence in one's own racial identity. The second factor is the negative media coverage and adverse social treatment of minorities by the majority populace. This treatment and coverage tend to highlight the racial difference of minority populations. By highlighting differences with mainstream society, a link is naturally formed between problems plaguing minority communities and their race. This way, their identity becomes racialised, problematised, and, as such, marked as less desirable in comparison to the norm. This results in the conscious manifestation of one's own racial minority identity and raises awareness of its negative perception in mainstream society.

In comparison to black and other minorities, white people in Western society, where this research project is located, develop their racial identity *unconsciously* for the most part (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Ford, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Stroman, 1991). White people's own race tends to be invisible as Western society is centred around values, norms, and frameworks that are informed by white culture, ethnicity, religion, and race (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Ford, 2005; Fujioka, 2005; Stroman, 1991). This white society is therefore commonly referred to as the norm from which all others deviate. For that reason, white people are generally not confronted with their difference to others, but rather with the difference of others to them (Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Fujioka, 2005). This way, the unconscious racial identity development within white people contrasts with the conscious development of racial identity in minority populations. Non-white individuals, therefore, tend to be subjected to a different social reality.

2.1.3. Media, race, and racial identity

As established, the meanings associated with race and racial identity are not static. Race is a dynamic social construct that only acquires meaning in, and through, discourse (Demo & Hughes, 1990; Guess, 2006; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). Meanings can change depending on the dominating ideas. Given the generally negative discourses associated with particular racial minority groups, they are always in contestation.

Media has the *power* to create, influence, and reinforce meanings (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Meijer & De Bruin, 2003; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). Herein lies the issue. Intentionally or not, media engages in the popularisation of discourses about certain racial groups. It shapes discourses and ideas surrounding racial groups and their identity (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016b; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). In the creation of media, a choice is made in which stories are told, whose narratives are highlighted, and which ideas, thus, dominate. In doing so, the media is responsible for creating a certain kind of “groupthink” according to Barthes, which turns certain representations into “common sense” truths through means of repetition (Barthes, 1972; Campbell, 2016a, p. 13; Campbell, 1995, p. 18). Given the powerful effects that

media has on society, scholars stress the importance of accurate and wide-ranging media representation of minorities (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a).

Portrayals of and stories about minorities in media, whether it is entertainment-based or journalism-based, affect the real-world in significant ways. Our notions and ideas of gender, race, and sexuality are affected by images presented in media (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). It affects both the out-group's perception of these dimensions and informs how the in-group views itself. For instance, non-black people's ideas of what it means to be black tend to come from the media's depictions of black people. At the same time, black people become aware of what other people think about them based on how they are depicted in the media thus affecting their behaviour. Therefore, black representation leads to the formation of ideas of blackness and black identity that affects both black and non-black people. As such, inaccurate representation can lead to problematic views of blackness (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a). As this study focuses on the American show *Dear White People* (2017-), the next section discusses the mediated representation of black people in the United States.

2.2. Mediated representations

The mediated representation of race has caught the attention of scholars for decades due to the fact that media plays a sizable role in our modern society. Representation refers to how media portrays the world and its various inhabitants (Hall, 2012). It also “refers broadly to what images and texts mean, the meanings that they potentially convey, and how they come to take on those meanings” (Beltrán, 2018, p. 97). Media does not merely reflect the world when portraying it, but they re-present it. In other words, the media is actively selecting, presenting, structuring, shaping, and, as a consequence, ascribing meanings to things (Hall, 2012). In doing so, mainstream media, whether that is news media or entertainment media, informs people what it means to be a man or a woman, black or white, heterosexual or homosexual, etcetera. By selecting, shaping, and ignoring specific stories and people, media creates, influences, and reinforces discourses about the world and its populace (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Meijer & De Bruin, 2003; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). The matter of media representation, therefore, raises important questions of ideology and power: who are represented, how are they represented, and by whom are they represented (Hall, 2012)? It is vital to study what mainstream mass media (re)presents, what it tells about the world, and in what ways media reflects or deviates from reality. Therefore, this section focuses on mediated representations of black people on American television. That includes an analysis of black representation in terms of quantity and quality. The contrasting representation of race between fictional and non-fictional television is discussed as well.

2.2.1. Black representation

Research over the past few decades has documented that depictions between different races and ethnicities on entertainment television have been all but fair (Hunt et al., 2019; Mastro, 2009, 2017; Mastro &

Greenberg; 2000). Problems can be found both in terms of quantity and quality. People of colour have been consistently underrepresented on television across genres and platforms (Hunt et al., 2019). On top of that, the majority of people of colour that do appear on television can be placed on a limited spectrum of, often stereotypical, roles (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a). There is, however, some variation between groups in terms of (mis)representation. Some, such as Asian-Americans, are more underrepresented than others, whilst others, such as Latino-Americans, are consistently misrepresented and relegated to overwhelmingly negative roles such as drug lords and crime bosses (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a; Hunt et al., 2019). However, one group, in particular, has most strongly been affected by under- and misrepresentation by mainstream media, namely African Americans, or, more broadly speaking, black people.

This mis- and underrepresentation started decades ago. Early media imagery caricatured black people and portrayed them as *stereotypes* and in primitive lights (Brown, 2016). Stereotypes are depictions that are influenced by over-generalised “beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups” (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). They are generally negative, one-dimensional, and partly the result of decades of mis- and underrepresentation. Historically, black images contained stereotypical and racist undertones and could be found anywhere from books to newspapers (e.g. the brute, coon, picaninny caricatures). These images set the tone for how black people would later be depicted in media such as film and television. According to Brown (2016) and Nelson (2008), the majority of depictions throughout history are presenting a negative image of black people. For example, black people are overwhelmingly displayed as loud, irrational, and lazy. Or in roles such as criminals, gangsters, or rapists. Accordingly, these negative depictions have helped cement power structures by demeaning marginalised groups and, as such, have bolstered the privileged status of the ruling (white) class (Brown, 2016; Nelson, 1998, 2008). That is because such imagery simply reaffirms the *dominant* ideology about these minorities, which helps maintain the status quo (Corner, 1997; Gitlin, 1979; Nelson, 1998, 2008). Despite slight improvements, stereotypes and hegemonic ideas persist in many of today's productions (Hunt et al., 2019; Mastro, 2017; Mastro & Greenberg; 2000; Nelson, 2008).

In the specific field of television, the reinforcement of stereotypes and hegemonic ideas about black people can be attributed to the politics of the production process (Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Nelson, 1998, 2008). The production process is influenced by the dominant ideology, which favours a white, male, middle-class perspective when producing stories. As such, it pushes other perspectives to the background, influences which stories are told, and also determines by whom they are told. That also occurs when African Americans are part of the creative process (Molina-Guzmán, 2016). The reason is that creative control, more often than not, lies with studios and networks that are overwhelmingly white. Therefore, black people get relatively little say in this process (Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Nelson, 1998, 2008). In other words, power lies overwhelmingly in the hands of white executives that can overrule ideas that do not adhere to the dominant ideology (Molina-Guzmán, 2016). As such, getting stories produced that accurately represent black people and oppose decades

of misrepresentation is rather difficult (Molina-Guzmán, 2016). Accordingly, black representation remains a never-ending point of contention.

2.2.2. Quantity of black portrayals on television

Black people were rarely seen on American television before the 1970s (Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao, 2013). Analyses indicate this improved in the 1970s, with 6% of the characters being black in comparison to the 12% black populace of the U.S. The number increased to 8% in the 1980s and to 11% in the early 1990s (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). In the mid-1990s, black people were proportionally represented, with 13% of the characters being portrayed by black people. By now, this number has increased to 16.1% (Hunt et al., 2019). That is slightly higher than their current ratio in the U.S. populace, which is about 15%.

A closer look at the exact role distribution, however, reveals another side to the story. Careful examination unveils that black people are consistently overrepresented in situation comedies on networks that have lower viewership (Hunt et al., 2019; Signorielli, 2004, 2009a). For example, shows like *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2009) on The CW. If such shows stop airing, then that representation percentage takes a huge hit (Hunt et al., 2019; Signorielli, 2004, 2009a). In turn, this highlights the fact that drama series still significantly underrepresent black people. Especially on high viewership networks. This is somewhat troublesome as situation comedies are, due to genre conventions, less likely to present three-dimensional characters. In contrast, dramas are more likely to provide three-dimensional images of black people (Mastro, 2009). Consequently, the underrepresentation of black people in dramas and the overrepresentation in sitcoms on lower viewership networks leads to a limited range of blackness on television. Because of this segregation of black representation, viewers are exposed to a very narrow notion of black identity (Mastro, 2009). At the same time, black actors/actresses' relegation to sitcoms leads to a perpetuation of stereotypes of black people as funny, loud, silly, lazy, and irrational (Mastro, 2009; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006; Signorielli, 2004, 2009a). Once again, due to genre conventions.

Hunt et al. (2019) also report that, when black and other minority people are present, they tend to be disproportionately relegated to the background. For instance, in the 2016-2017 television season, around 31% of casts existed of black and other minority people. However, only 21% of the shows had a black and other minority lead indicating that white people are overwhelmingly placed in a leading role. These numbers indicate that people of colour are pushed to the background and reveals how they are not deemed as leading material in the film and television industries (Fuller, 2010). This distribution can be attributed to the outdated discourse that leading characters have to be white to attain financial success (Fuller, 2010; Hunt et al., 2019). Another problem that is exposed through these numbers is that of tokenism. Tokenism refers to the phenomenon of minority actors/actresses not getting the same treatment as their white counterparts and, instead, being used to fill up a diversity quota. As such, these characters are relegated to filler roles (Brown, 2016; Northcott, Seggar, Hinton, & Hinton, 1975).

2.2.3. Quality of black portrayals on television

Television portrayals of black people throughout U.S. media history have been quite problematic. Before the 1960s, black portrayals on television mostly consisted of entertaining and dumb servants of white leads (Greenberg, Mastro & Brand, 2002; Wilson et al., 2013). However, by the early 1970s, TV started placing black actors in idealised settings such as fully “integrated” black families (Mastro, Figueroa-Caballero, & Sink, 2016, p. 79). Despite the naïve nature of some of these portrayals, it marked a positive departure from the negative portrayals that were commonplace prior to the 1970s. The black family became a staple for sitcoms throughout the 1970s and finally portrayed a more extensive range of blackness on television. Think of *Good Times (1974-1980)*, which became the first African American two-parent family sitcom. However, despite such developments, the black characters were still frequently typecast as poor, lazy, fun-loving, irresponsible, and jobless in such sitcoms (Ford, 1997; Greenberg et al., 2002; Mastro et al., 2016; Ward, 2004).

In the 1980s, there was another move towards more positive portrayals. A prominent example hereof is *The Cosby Show (1984-1992)* which portrayed black people in a successful middle-class setting. As such, they were portrayed in a more professional setting than their 1970s counterparts (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). This practice from the 80s became even more commonplace in the 90s and 00s. According to Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005), one can still frequently find the archetype from the 1980s displayed in today's entertainment: the black character on primetime television is typically a middle-class male that is working in law enforcement or in another professional job.

More recent analyses have documented that unmistakable differences still exist in terms of appearance and occupation of black and white characters (Brown, 2016; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, & Jackson, 2010; Signorielli, 2009a, 2009b). White people are presented as more professional, well-groomed, and more respectable than black people (Brown, 2016; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). This practice has contributed to the image that black people do not fit well in a professional setting on television. This is especially the case for black women, who are by far the least likely to be shown occupying a professional occupation on television (Signorielli, 2009b). In terms of role distribution, black people tend to play the main supporting character to the white lead. As such, black people are showcased as an ally and given a more significant role than ever (Fuller, 2010; Hunt et al., 2019). Still, they are given less importance than the white lead characters (Brown, 2016; Hunt et al., 2019).

All of this adds together to show that, despite having reached a significant point quantity-wise, black people are still frequently relegated to limited roles and settings that seem to perpetuate historical notions of blackness. Despite improvements in quality, a full range of blackness is still lacking. Instead, black people are used as support, perpetuating the decades-long tradition of the black helper (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Hughey, 2009). Looking at both quantity and quality of representation, it is clear how the media creates, influences, and maintains images of blackness that are limiting and unfavourable. The consequences of

exposure to these images are discussed later in a more detailed fashion. Before doing so, the contrasting ways in which race is represented on fictional and non-fictional television is discussed.

2.2.4. Contrasting race representation in fictional and non-fictional television

The issues with black representation are not exclusive to fictional scripted entertainment. The news media also plays a role in the negative image of black people. It is, therefore, crucial to not only look at entertainment media but also news media (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Meijer & De Bruin, 2003; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). Especially given that entertainment media and news media influence one another and, together, play a major role in the perception of African Americans (Brown, 2016). Also, many creators get inspiration from news articles to write their stories as evidenced by all the “based on a true story” films.

Gray (1986, 1989, 2005) notably extensively studied journalistic media and entertainment media. He documented the contrasting representations of African American life on television (Gray, 1986). On the one hand, they tend to be depicted in a middle-class setting on fictional television. On the other hand, they tend to be depicted in an underclass setting on non-fictional television. According to Gray (1989, 1989, 2005), fictional television tends to present a world of racial oneness and equality that ignores real-world problems. Therefore, fictional television does not coincide with reality. Racism, racial inequality, and underlying social forces that are responsible for the displacement of African Americans within society are ignored in many fictional programmes in favour of an idealised world. This way, such programmes choose to forgo harsh realities for entertainment reasons. Contrastingly, non-fictional television overwhelmingly focuses on African Americans in a negative light. An emphasis is put on issues such as crime and poverty within underclass black communities. However, no context or explanation is provided for the existence and persistence of these social problems. Gray (1986, 1989, 2005) and other scholars (Austin, Bolls, Fujioka, & Engelbertson, 1999; Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a; Dixon, 2007; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Peffley, Shields & Williams, 1996; Tan, Fujioka & Tan, 2000) note that these contrasting depictions lead to a gap in understanding such real-life issues and fosters the negative perception of African Americans. That, in turn, tarnishes support for policies aimed at resolving such issues.

Campbell (1995, 2012, 2016a, 2016b) extends on these notable contrasts between non-fictional and fictional television. He too highlights that the contrasting representation is problematic because it does not build an understanding of the causes that underscore the many troubles tarnishing the African American community. Rather, utopian portrayals of successful middle-class African Americans only tarnish support for initiatives that aim to resolve the issues faced by underclass black communities (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a). Viewers may essentially buy into the idea that if the fictional family on television has managed to escape underclass black life, then everyone should be able to do so. It is essentially their fault if they do not manage to do so (Campbell, 2016a). This reasoning, however, ignores the broader societal, historical, and political causes and factors that are responsible for the problems that these communities are facing. For those

reasons, the positive depictions of African Americans, however well intended, might instead be doing more harm than good by ignoring the realities that many African Americans face. These contrasting depictions essentially individualise problems rather than place them in a systemic, collective, and institutional context (Austin et al., 1999; Baynes, 2003; Brown, 2016; Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Campbell, 2016a; Dixon, 2007; Ford, 1997; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Peffley et al., 1996; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Tan et al., 2000).

In his studies, Campbell (1995, 2012, 2016a, 2016b) further presents three specific myths that seem to persist when it comes to racial representations in American media. He studied these in light of American news media as they play a massive role in how the image of race is shaped within society. The three recurring myths that Campbell documented present “a hegemonic consensus about race and class that sustains myths about life outside of white, ‘mainstream’ America” (Campbell, 1995, p. 132). He argues that these myths influence how society views certain racial groups and influence how these groups are depicted and viewed in entertainment media as well. Meaning that news media forms the base from where all perceptions start.

Firstly, the “myth of marginality” posits that people of colour are seen as less valuable and, therefore, mostly ignored in the media. Campbell (1995, 2012, 2016a, 2016b) explains that people of colour are pretty much invisible in local media coverage. When they are present, they are covered in one-dimensional ways. Campbell also compares positive news about black and white people. Here he finds that news stories spend twice as much time discussing the contributions of white heroes as they do of black heroes (Campbell, 2016a). An observation is also made of conflicts between different racial/ethnic groups: coverage tends to favour the perspective of the white group and does not give an equal platform to the other, non-white group. This imbalance displays a lack of care, insensitivity, and bias against minority communities. This biased coverage, combined with the lack of regular representation, contributes to a disproportionately negative image of people of colour which helps perpetuate bias and racism in society (Campbell, 2016a).

Secondly, the “myth of difference”, which argues that people of colour are represented in a different way than white people. This myth is especially visible in the way that American news covers stories. In his analysis, he observes the persistence of stereotypical depictions of people of colour, whether it be negative or positive. On the one hand, media tends to reinforce negative stereotypes of people of colour as violent and dangerous. On the other hand, news stories frequently reinforce positive stereotypes of the black entertainer and the black athlete. White people, however, are not stereotyped in their coverage based on their race. They are given wide-ranging coverage compared to the narrow spectrum owed to people of colour. Therefore, white people are granted a lack of racial identification and granted an individualised approach to their existence (Campbell, 2016a; Gray, 1986, 1989, 2005). Minorities are not granted that same *racial blindness*, and specific ideas of blackness are linked to their very existence. As such, these ideas of racial blindness, whiteness, and blackness are so embedded and normalised in society that most people are likely unaware of them and the influence that these ideas have (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a).

Thirdly, the “myth of assimilation”, which purports that coloured minorities have successfully assimilated into American society. In other words, mass media has put forward a narrative which presents American society to have entered a so-called “post-racial” or “race-blind” era. According to this myth, racism is something of the past, or for some extreme members of society, and the colour of one's skin does not determine one's chances in society anymore. This narrative has found firm footing despite proof of the contrary: minorities are still disproportionately incarcerated, given harsher sentences for the same crime in comparison to their white counterparts, and violent images of minorities are disproportionately distributed on the news (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a). This post-racial myth is not only distributed through mainstream news media but TV fiction and films as well: the harsh realities of modern-day racism are overwhelmingly foregone in favour of ideas of racial unity in American productions (Campbell, 2016a). A recent study of racial representations in the news notes that little has changed in 2012 in comparison to 1995 (Campbell, LeDuff & Brown, 2012). The Obama presidency was extensively proclaimed to be the last step towards a post-racial American society. The study, however, documents that media coverage of black people only worsened during the Obama presidency. Such developments fed the myth of assimilation, further damaging support for political and societal reform for people in need of help.

To conclude, this section discusses a significant body of work on the topic of mediated representations. When looking at the history of representation of black people, it can be seen where problematic and limited ideas of blackness arise from. Especially when the contrasts between fictional and non-fictional television are considered. The next section examines the consequences of exposure to problematic and limiting representations of blackness on viewers and society at large. First, however, the concepts of meaning-making and active audiences are discussed.

2.3. Reception and interpretation

In this third section, the focus moves away from the content of media to the consumers of media with a focus on Hall's encoding/decoding model. Proposed decades ago, Hall's model and his extensive work on media representation are still used to understand meaning-making processes of audiences as evidenced by recent studies such as Castleberry (2016), Molina-Guzmán (2016), and Shaw (2017). The influence of his model is particularly evident in the fact that it has been cited over 10.000 times according to Google Scholar².

The next few parts, therefore, discuss the topics of reception and interpretation with the help of Hall's work. First, the concepts of active audiences and different readings are introduced. Hereafter, the conscious rejection of dominant meanings is tackled. Finally, the consequences of exposure to media on various people are discussed in more detail.

² As of the 1st of May 2020.

2.3.1. Media readings and active audiences

In the 1970s, Hall introduced the idea that media texts do not possess one single meaning (Campbell, 2016a). His idea proposes that media texts are relatively open to be read and interpreted in different ways by different people. He attributes different meanings that people deduce from media texts to both personal background and social circumstances (Campbell, 2016a; Fiske, 1992; Hall, 2012). In other words, different life experiences are responsible for differences in interpretations of media texts (Campbell, 2016a; Hall, 2012). Through his vast research, Hall attempted to challenge particular meanings that have become dominant in media and, in turn, have become dominant in society. As such, he extensively analysed media representation of minorities. He aimed to unlock the power of media images and the consequences that mis- and underrepresentation have on the marginalised members of society.

To study representation, Hall introduced the so-called *meaning-making* process of audiences. Hall (2012) describes this process through terms of *encoding* and *decoding*. Basically, every media text has a message that it intends to communicate to its audience. This message is created and encoded by the creators, producers, and the production team. The audience, however, is responsible for making the message come to life, i.e. decoding the message.

As previously mentioned, creators of mainstream media content are overwhelmingly white and male (Hunt et al., 2019; Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Nelson, 1998, 2008). The encoded message, therefore, generally tends to reflect dominant ideology, which favours a white, male, middle-class perspective (Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Nelson, 1998, 2008). As such, the message that is encoded in mass media texts does not reflect everyone's reality. As such, the meanings that audiences take away from a media text can greatly differ from the intended one. That difference can be especially stark in marginalised communities that are being (mis)represented by a white- and male-dominant mass media (Fiske, 1992; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). Fiske (1992), therefore, describes this process of meaning-making or culture creation as being a “constant site of struggle between those with and those without power” (p. 292). In other words, powerless marginalised communities are struggling to get their reality represented rather than someone else's. Hall (2012) refers to this as the “politics of signification” (p. 173). The issue lies in the fact that the people that are most harmed by matters of media representation are usually the ones that do not have the means at their disposal to discredit negative meanings and discourses about themselves on a large scale (Campbell, 2016b; Fiske & Hartley, 2004; Geertz, 1983). Thus, regardless of the intended message the creators aim to communicate, audiences engage in the media text and decode the meaning of it in their own unique way.

To explain these different readings, Hall ascribed three levels to the decoding process of media messages. The first level is called the *preferred* reading, also known as the dominant reading. In this case, the reader of the media text decodes the text in the way that the producers encoded it. The second level is called the *negotiated* reading of a media text. In this, one analyses the meaning contained within the media text beyond that what is intended by the producers. As such, audiences interpret the media text in their own

unique way. Then there is the third level, which is called the *oppositional* reading. In this case, audiences completely reject the preferred/dominant reading and engage in an oppositional reading of the text. According to Fiske and Hartley (2004), people who engage in this kind of reading recognise the broader ideology, culture, and social principles that guide the media messages. These viewers recognise that it does not reflect their beliefs, but somebody else's beliefs, and therefore denounce it as being misguided and wrong. As such, the three readings by Hall represent the way the process of meaning-making works in relation to media texts. It is not a process wherein audiences *passively* consume cultural products. Instead, it is an *active* process where different meanings are ascribed to texts by different people. Yet, creators can still influence the amount of possible interpretation (Eco, 1984; Livingstone, 1990). As such, there is a delicate balance between the two: on the one side, media texts are structured to “guide and restrict interpretation” and, on the other side, audiences make their own interpretation of that structured text (Livingstone, 1990, p. 23). And as Barthes already noted in 1967, “the ultimate meanings of a text” lays in the interpretations rather than “in the text itself” (in Beltrán, 2018, p. 98).

2.3.2. Rejection of dominant meanings

Even though specific meanings are imbued in television series, it is the audiences that eventually decode it. Therefore, it is essential to not only study the meanings contained within the texts but to investigate the interpretative qualities of its viewers. Reception studies have documented two findings when it comes to racial/ethnic/religious minorities. The first is that some members of such minorities accept the meanings contained within media texts and subjugate to hegemonic notions prescribed to their race, ethnicity, or religion (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Fujioka, 2005; Martinez & Ramasubramanian, 2015; Ramasubramanian, 2011a; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; Ward, 2004). In other words, some members cope with the negative media image by blaming themselves and their own minority group for their problems. The second is that members of such minorities resist the negative ideas and notions contained about them within media texts (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Fujioka, 2005; Martinez & Ramasubramanian, 2015; Ramasubramanian, 2011a; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; Ward, 2004). This means that minority group members cope with negative coverage by distancing themselves from the constructed image. Mostly because they do not identify with that image. These findings are recurring for African, Asian, Latino, and Muslim American audiences. At the same time, Caucasian American audiences generally do not resist negative depictions of these minorities (Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Ramasubramanian, 2007; Ramasubramanian, 2011b; Rockler, 2002; Tan et al., 2000; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Instead, they tend to accept them as truthful, which results in negative perceptions of these groups.

In essence, the latter minority viewers engage in oppositional readings of mainstream media texts. Such people are generally aware of their otherness in opposition to the generally assumed whiteness of audiences. Therefore, when their minority group is portrayed negatively or inaccurately, they tend to recognise it,

whereas white audiences do not. As such, audiences clearly vary in their recognition of stereotypes and in their interpretation of media content. One does not have to look further than the hugely varying reactions to the series *Dear White People* (2017-) for proof (Ugwu, 2018). The assertion can thus be made that meaning-making is an active process executed by audiences. Socio-cultural differences help explain the variety within their interpretations. Age, class, gender, race/ethnicity, etcetera all contribute to the emergence of different interpretations (Meijer & De Bruin, 2003; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017).

2.3.3. Effects of media exposure

Studies show that underrepresentation and the lack of diversity within minority portrayals have societal consequences that need to be addressed (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a; Ford, 1997; Page, 2005; Page, 1997; Ward, 2014). These studies document how media affects the behaviours, emotions, and cognitions of audiences. These effects are consistent with the content of said media. That does not mean that every consumer is affected in the same way. However, the outcome is pushed in a particular direction.

Empirical research shows that media has the power to create, influence, and reinforce stereotypes, biases, and discourses about black people (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Meijer & De Bruin, 2003; Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017). Studies find that frequent exposure to *negative* discourses and stereotypes increases negative person perception (Austin et al., 1999; Ford, 1997; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). That effectively results in a real-world negative bias towards such minority groups (Ford, 1997). Research also documents a decrease in self-esteem among minority youth following extensive exposure to stereotypes (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Baynes, 2003; Ward, 2004). On top of that, frequent exposure to stereotypes and negative discourses causes viewers to take these depictions as realistic and authentic. Especially with people that lack real-life exposure to people from another racial or ethnic background (Baynes, 2003). Furthermore, exposure to these negative depictions also leads to a decrease in sympathy and support for affirmative action and other diversity-related policies (Brown, 2016; Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Ramasubramanian, 2011b; Tan et al., 2000). Research also finds that long-term exposure to negative depictions of black people in media leads to negative views on matters such as intelligence, work ethic, values, socioeconomic status, and criminality (Austin et al., 1999; Dixon, 2007; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Peffley et al., 1996; Tan et al., 2000). Exposure also leads to extensive support for public policies aimed at controlling black bodies (Brown, 2016). As such, a picture is formed on how media contributes to the preservation of biases, ignorance, and discrimination in modern-day society (Baynes, 2003).

Research has also documented the use of *positive* discourses and positive stereotypes and the effect they have on audiences (Donagher, Poulos, Liebert, & Davidson, 1975; Atkin, 1992; Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a). The past decades have seen increasing portrayals of black people as virtuous, as helpers, or as givers. However, Punyanunt-Carter (2008) notes that some viewers tend to reject those positive depictions for being unrealistic. That suggests that hegemonic discourses and stereotypes are so ingrained that alternative

depictions get rejected for not fitting in with established beliefs. Other research does indicate that positive depictions can contribute to positive behaviour towards black people and support for certain policy-related positions by white audiences under certain conditions (Austin et al., 1999; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006). On top of that, studies indicate that positive portrayals of minority characters can increase self-esteem within minority youth (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Baynes, 2003; Ward, 2004).

To conclude, given the real-world impact of a majority of these ideas, Hall and other media scholars highlight the importance of studying meanings in media. Gaining and raising awareness facilitates change. Several studies already indicate that black and other minority people tend to recognise and reject stereotypical discourses about themselves, and therefore engage in an oppositional reading. White people, however, tend to take these discourses as truthful (Peeters & Van Sterkenburg, 2017; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Rockler, 2002). Meijer and De Bruin (2003), documented similar findings in the Netherlands: minorities reject storylines in Dutch soap operas for being stereotypical and non-truthful representations of themselves, while native respondents think those same storylines are informative of a different culture than their own and do not recognise the tropes.

2.4. Conclusion

A broad range of relevant literature is covered in the preceding three sections. Section one discussed the manifestation of racial identity and the role that media plays in it. Section two focused on black representation and intersecting issues. The third section put a light on active audiences and meaning-making. All of these elements relate to the study at hand as the research question is: *How do audiences respond to and interpret the representation of black identity in the series Dear White People (2017-)?* The discussion on identity helps explain responses of various people based on their own (racial) identity. The section covering black representation highlights several issues that the focus group participants and interviewees may or may not be aware of. Awareness, or lack thereof, influences responses as well. The parts discussing media readings, meaning-making processes, and consequences of exposure further aid in the contextualisation of responses and interpretations.

Moreover, *Dear White People (2017-)* addresses many of the highlighted problems in this chapter. Firstly, the series tackles the topic of racial identity and the problematisation of blackness. It explores the marginalisation of black people, racial tensions in the United States, and the consequences that this has on people (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018). Secondly, the series explores issues of representation in multiple ways: it subverts classical distribution of roles with its majority black cast; it portrays a wide range of blackness; and it portrays the characters in three-dimensional and non-stereotypical ways (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018). Thirdly, it plays with the notion of active audiences and meaning-making (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018). It actively tries to call out hegemonic discourses and persistent ideas about black people and presents oppositional storylines. By

doing so, it confronts various viewers about their own (potential) biases and tries to make people think and reflect on what they just saw.

Given all of that, it is intriguing to see how various audiences make sense of what they see in the series. Do the focus group participants pick up on the series storylines and messaging? Do the interviewees see it as a valuable show, and do they think its representation of black identity is good? Moreover, how do the responses and meaning-making processes differ across racial/ethnic backgrounds? What about the *identification/relatability*, which can be defined as “an imaginative process invoked as a response to characters presented within mediated texts”, with the series' characters and storylines (Cohen, 2001, p. 250)? What roles do race and personal background play in the process of identification/relatability? Furthermore, does the show correspond with viewers in the Netherlands, which has an entirely different racial context than the United States?

3. Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is explained in this chapter. Firstly, the research design is discussed. A justification is provided for the use of qualitative research techniques, a mixed-methods approach for data gathering, and a thematic analysis of the data. Secondly, the sampling methods and data sets are described. Thirdly, the operationalisation of the main concepts is presented. Fourthly, the data collection and analyses are specified. Fifthly, systematicity and transparency are discussed. Sixthly, research ethics are outlined.

3.1. Research design

The present study examined, in an explorative fashion, how people from various racial/ethnic³ backgrounds respond to and make sense of the representation of black identity in the series *Dear White People* (2017-). The goal of this research was to document how people respond to the series, how people interpret and give meaning to the show, and most importantly to attain a deeper understanding of how responses and interpretations can be linked to and explained by their backgrounds. Given this project's focus on meaning-making processes, qualitative research was the most suitable approach to answer the proposed research question. Qualitative research facilitates the examination of a variety of truths and meanings (Brennen, 2017). In order to collect the required data, a two-step approach to data collection was employed. The first step utilised focus groups, whilst the second step employed interviews. Hereafter, thematic analysis was used to extract results from the collected data.

Focus groups were chosen as a method of data collection for several reasons. First of all, focus groups help explore a research topic by freely allowing discussion with several participants. Through this, a broad range of opinions and responses can be collected (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Brennen, 2017; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Second of all, in contrast to surveys or interviews, focus groups replicate, to an extent, the settings in which television series are viewed and discussed (Bloor et al., 2001; Stewart et al., 2007). As such, initial responses to the footage can be documented. On top of that, the ensuing discussion between participants can result in more representative results in comparison to the collection of survey responses (Bloor et al., 2001; Stewart et al., 2007). Third of all, the research problem is rather complicated and requires an in-depth discussion with a number of people to extract a large amount of data. Focus groups are an efficient method to do so (Stewart et al., 2007). Fourth of all, group interactions can be observed (Bloor et al., 2001; Brennen, 2017; Stewart et al., 2007). As such, differences in individual and group behaviour can be detected. All in all, these reasons warranted the suitability of focus groups for this study's goals.

³ Although there are differences between race/ethnicity, this study does not explicitly differentiate between them. Instead, they are used solely to identify an individual's majority or minority status in society.

Hereafter, semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilised to collect more exhaustive and extensive data. Interviews were chosen as a method of data collection for several reasons. First of all, interviews help explore the research topic by allowing in-depth one-on-one questioning of the interviewees (Brennen, 2017; Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). This line of questioning can reveal the reasoning of interviewees and further the understanding of personal motivations. Second of all, one-on-one interviews stimulate the interviewees in sharing personal experiences. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, people might be less likely to share personal matters during a focus group (Legard et al., 2003). Third of all, unlike focus groups, interviews lessen the likelihood for socially desired answers as there are no people that might judge their responses (Legard et al., 2003; Noelle-Neumann, 1977; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). Furthermore, the interviewer can more easily persuade the interviewee into given his or her honest thoughts on a sensitive subject matter (Brennen, 2017; Legard et al., 2003; Noelle-Neumann, 1977; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). Together, these arguments justified the utilisation of this research method.

The mixed-methods approach to data collection was adopted for several reasons. As mentioned, focus groups allow the simultaneous collection of data from several persons (Bloor et al., 2001; Brennen, 2017; Stewart et al., 2007). However, this approach inhibits more in-depth discussions on the participants' motivations and reasonings due to the rapid nature of focus groups. Also, participants are less likely to question their opinions when most of the focus group supports it (Noelle-Neumann, 1977; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). Interviews allow for a more thorough questioning of an individual's motivations and reasonings, which alleviates this problem. Furthermore, some participants are reserved in their responses during focus groups due to shyness or due to the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1977; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). These complications are also alleviated with interviews. Moreover, data obtained from focus groups could reveal topics that should be discussed more in-depth. As such, the focus groups act as a guide in the creation of the topic list for the interviews. The combination of focus groups and interviews, therefore, result in more extensive and complementary data. Also, the responses from the interviews can result in new insights and, thus, a re-evaluation of the focus group data. As such, a more profound conclusion can be drawn. All in all, a mixed-methods approach leads to a more rigorous analysis examination of people's opinions and meaning-making processes (Brennen, 2017).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the focus groups and interviews. Considered a foundational method for qualitative analysis, thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and its focus on identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The method is especially useful in finding meaning in large amounts of data, which comes in useful taking into consideration the nature of this project (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis also allows for an in-detail description and interpretation of data with an emphasis on context (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Due to the role that factors such as race, underlying ideologies, and implicit assumptions play in the interpretative process, the researcher of this project

performed a thematic analysis at the latent level which, as Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, “goes beyond the semantic content of the data” (p. 84). Additionally, thematic analysis provides a systematic way to examine data for thematic patterns which results in scientifically valid results (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As such, thematic analysis was an enriching and suitable method to assess data and answer the research question of this study.

3.2. Sampling and dataset

The present study focuses on how people from various racial/ethnic backgrounds respond to the series *Dear White People* (2017-). To participate in the study, research subjects needed to meet the following general criteria: (a) be between 18 and 25 years old, (b) live in the Netherlands, (c) be (formerly⁴) enrolled at Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)⁵.

For the focus groups, a diverse pool of participants was sought based on gender, race, and ethnicity. A balanced pool of participants was desired. The makeup of the samples was also subjected to specific requirements: one of the focus groups was all-black; another was all-white; and the other focus group was mixed with white, black, and other minority people such as those with a Chinese or Turkish background. The goal was to look at differences between and differences within the three focus groups in terms of responses. It is documented that focus groups with similar participants tend to increase the level of comfort of the participants when discussing sensitive subjects (Acocella, 2012; Bloor et al., 2001; Brennen, 2017; Stewart et al., 2007). As such, this present construction allowed people to more easily state their thoughts on a sensitive topic, given that the fear of hurting others was minimised and the need to give socially desired responses was also lessened. Separating white and black people was thus a logical decision to attain representative and honest expressions. It was expected that a more diverse set of responses can be documented with this method. However, a mixed group was also conceived to document what happens when a wider variety of participants are assembled together.

A potential link could be found between specific readings and the background of the participants with the current construction of the groups. A white group provided the opportunity to analyse comments from the perspective of the dominant majority in Western society. A black group documented the perspectives of a non-dominant minority. A mixed group allowed for negotiation between white, black, and other minority people. The final selection consisted of 15 participants, of which nine are female, with each focus group containing five people. In the mixed group, two of the people were white, one was black, and two were from other minority groups. Appendix C contains the exact makeup of the groups.

⁴ Only persons that graduated less than a year prior to the focus group session/interview were accepted.

⁵ Note that none of the persons was involved in any media and communication programme offered at EUR.

Moreover, the focus groups contained five participants that had already seen the show beforehand. This was intended in order to document differences in interpretations between people that did and people that did not see the show. As such, initial responses to the show could be documented and, afterwards, compared to responses from people that had already seen the show.

For the interviews, a similar approach was used. A balance between males and females was attained. Furthermore, an equal mix of white, black and other minorities, such as Turkish and Vietnamese people, was sought. As the focus groups focused more so on initial responses and interpretations to the show, a new criterion was added to shift the focus to more in-depth discussions on the themes of the show: the interviewees had to have seen one or two seasons of the series *Dear White People* (2017-). The final selection consisted of six interviewees, of which three were female. Two of the interviewees were participants of the focus groups. Given their interesting responses during the focus groups, they were asked to return for the interviews. Finally, two of the interviewees were black, two were white, and two were of another racial/ethnic background. Appendix C contains the exact makeup of the interviewees.

A mix of non-random purposive sampling and snowball sampling was employed to find people (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Flick, 2011b). The participants/interviewees were selected based on predetermined criteria, such as relevance to the research subject at hand. This method was employed to find persons with characteristics that were of interest. A balance between gender and race was sought to obtain an assortment of data and to prevent biased results (Brennen, 2017; Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988). The persons were sought in multiple ways: by contacting student associations such as the Association of Students of African Heritage (ASAH), by posting in Facebook groups, and by approaching strangers on campus. Moreover, participants/interviewees were asked to refer interested people. The final sample of students was notably diverse and heterogeneous. There were differences in racial/ethnic/religious backgrounds, nationalities, studies, gender, and more.

The final data set size consisted of fifteen focus group participants and six interviewees. The data was collected through three focus group sessions that lasted in-between 80-90 minutes and six interviews of approximately 45-55 minutes. The study's complexity and the focus on meaning-making processes, rather than informational or factual processes, resulted in an elaborate and lengthy analysis of the collected data. As such, the sum of focus groups and interviews were deemed sufficiently exhaustive.

3.3. Operationalisation

In order to provide a structured in-depth analysis of the research subject, a comprehensive topic list for the focus group was constructed. Relevant themes were created, partially informed by concepts and ideas from past literature. On top of that, specific scenes and storylines were selected from the series *Dear White People* (2017-) based on relevance to the research question. These scenes were shown during the focus groups to act as a stimulus and spark a conversation. In turn, discussions from the focus groups informed the topic

list of the semi-structured in-depth interviews. This way, topics that were found to be more relevant to the research question were given extra attention in the interviews.

The topic list for the focus groups was divided into five sections. Firstly, a set of general questions was created. These questions functioned to break the ice and establish a relaxed and welcome environment and to create *rappport* (Morrison-Beedy, Côté-Arsenault, & Feinstein, 2001). It also allowed everyone the opportunity to talk, which helped make everybody feel at ease and created rapport with the moderator. Furthermore, a link between name and voice was established on the recordings, which facilitated a smooth transcription process. Secondly, a set of questions focused on the viewing behaviour of (scripted) television of the participants. These questions helped paint a picture of the participants, their viewing preferences, and their TV diet. Thirdly, a set of questions documented the participants' attitudes towards race on scripted television. A brief exercise was also included to detail the role race plays in their viewing behaviour. In the exercise, the participants were asked to come up with black and white actors/actresses and to then identify the type of roles they play. The exercise and the questions helped form a picture of the participants' awareness, or lack thereof, on the topic of black representation, as discussed in section 2.2. Fourthly, a set of questions was based on the clips of *Dear White People* (2017-). In this section, the responses and the meanings given to the clips were documented (e.g. "What do you think of this scene?"). The participants' responses were beneficial as they revealed a lot about meaning-making processes, as described in section 2.3. Fifth and finally, the respondents were asked some general concluding questions (e.g. "How do you feel about the show now that you have seen these clips?"). See Appendix A for the complete topic list.

During the focus groups, several clips⁶ were shown. These clips were taken from specific scenes in *Dear White People* (2017-) and used as a stimulus for conversation. Initially, a selection of ten clips was formed based on relevance to the research question, the potential to spark a reaction, and the potential to entice a discussion. Scenes that emphasise specific aspects of the black minority experience were chosen. For instance, a scene that shows the series main lead suffering from cyber-racism (Back, 2002). After the initial selection of ten, the number of clips was narrowed down to six, due to the time constraint of the focus groups. The selection criteria were cohesiveness and originality within the overall selection: clips that were less understandable in the greater context or repetitive were removed. The final selection lasted a little over ten minutes. The purposes of each clip were the following:

1. Introduce the participants to the content and tone of the series. Some racially tinted experiences are highlighted in this clip.
2. Show a situation of racial misunderstanding between a white and a black person.
3. Illustrate the possible consequences of such a misunderstanding/conflict. It also introduces the issue of racial profiling.

⁶ Appendix D contains a description of the clips.

4. Display the consequences that mistreatment can have on one's mental well-being.
5. Highlight (reactionary) tensions and sentiments in modern society.
6. Display the effects that cyber-racism can have on a victim.

The topic list for the interviews was constructed after conducting the focus groups. Several exciting discussions arose that were inquired more elaborately during the interviews. For instance, the topics of identification, personal background, and stereotyping were more extensively discussed during the interviews. Since the interviewees had already seen one or two seasons of the series, there was no need to display any clips which allowed for more questions to be posed. The final topic list for the interviews was split into three topics. First, a set of general questions was asked. Once again, the function was mostly to break the ice, establish a relaxed and welcome environment, and to create rapport (Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). Second, a set of in-depth questions were asked about the series. This set of questions was subdivided into three topics. Initially, the storylines of the series were discussed (e.g. “Could you name any scenes that were particularly meaningful to you?”). The representation within the series was tackled, hereafter (e.g. “What would you say are the main differences with the representation of black people in other shows you have watched?”). Finally, the topic of identification was inquired about (e.g. “Would you say it is easier to identify with a character from a similar race?”). Third and last, to gauge societal effects of the show, participants were posed some final questions about the series (e.g. “What expectations did you have of the series before watching it, if any?”), the reactions to the show, and the need for similar programmes (e.g. “Would you say there is a need for these types of shows?”). Appendix B contains the complete topic list with the interview questions.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Focus groups were conducted on the 9th and 10th of May 2019. The focus groups were led by the researcher and executed in a private project room in the Polak building at the EUR. All the conversations were audio-recorded for later transcription. This was done to ensure the researcher's active involvement in the conversation and to warrant that the exact words from the participants could be used during the analysis (Legard et al., 2003). *Before* the focus groups started, all the participants were assured that they could share their honest and unfiltered thoughts (Legard et al., 2003). An emphasis was put on the fact that this was a safe environment, that there would be no repercussions to their comments, and that the participants could pass on answering a question if desired (Acocella, 2012; Legard et al., 2003; Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). *During* the focus groups, the researcher guided the participants through the five themes. However, there was much room for the conversation to develop freely and naturally. The groups contained five participants each and lasted in-between 80-90 minutes. The word count was in-between 9.000-11.000. This provided a sufficient amount of data for the analysis. Furthermore, all focus groups were conducted in English. Participants were occasionally allowed to answer in Dutch when they could not express themselves fully in English. These comments are translated into English when quoted.

After the focus groups, the sessions were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. After transcription, they were evaluated for exciting topics to incorporate into the topic list for the interviews. A new topic list was constructed based on the focus group results. The topic list for the in-depth semi-structured interviews was split into three categories. The aim was to delve deeper into the research topic and to explore the beliefs of the participants thoroughly.

Five interviews were conducted from the 18th till the 23rd of May 2019. A sixth interview was conducted on the 4th of July 2019. These were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in private, quiet spaces in a similar fashion to the focus groups. Once again, the participants were reminded to freely share their thoughts or opinions on the topic (Acocella, 2012; Legard et al., 2003; Morrison-Beedy et al., 2001). The setting and the one-on-one nature of the interview helped explore the topic on a deeper level as the participants more easily shared personal experiences (Legard et al., 2003). The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed room for personal input, which led to a more natural conversation (Legard et al., 2003). However, the topic list was still used to ensure that the main themes of the research were covered. The interviews all lasted between 45-55 minutes, which resulted in a satisfactory amount of relevant data. The word count ranged from 5.600 to 8.100. The interviews were all conducted in English.

Finally, after completion of the interviews and the transcriptions thereof, the coding process and data analysis ensued. The data was transcribed and analysed by the researcher. In order to identify all the relevant codes, the focus groups and interviews were analysed following the rigorous coding process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) with the use of data analysis software ATLAS.ti: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) building a coding frame, (4) searching for themes, (5) reviewing themes, (6) and defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Friese, Soratto, & Pires, 2018). This data analysis process was primarily data-driven and therefore followed an inductive approach to thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Friese et al., 2018). Note, however, that concepts and findings in past literature were studied prior to the construction of the topic lists. As Braun and Clarke (2006) point out, the coding process does not occur in an “epistemological vacuum” and disconnecting from one's prior knowledge is impossible (p. 84). Therefore, it can be said that this project also followed a deductive approach to some extent. As such, the followed process helped uncover new insights, rather than trying to fit the findings into an already existing framework, whilst simultaneously avoiding starting from scratch (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Friese et al., 2018). Finally, after a thorough data analysis process, a solid coding frame was built, which resulted in the formulation of relevant themes.

3.5. Transparency and systematicity

In order to make this qualitative research valid, it is necessary to reflect on the research process (Brennen, 2017; Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). Moreover, as Tuval-Mashiach (2017) argues, it is important for qualitative research to properly explain what, how, and why a decision is made at every single step of the

process for the sake of transparency and systematicity. This is achieved by following the four suggested criteria from Guba and Lincoln (1982) as presented below.

The study gains in *credibility* due to extensive interactions with the focus group participants and interviewees and by considering the effects of context on the results (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Furthermore, credibility is increased by triangulation of data, i.e. the use of a mixed-methods approach to data collection. On top of that, this study's supervisor is regularly consulted to ensure a proper research process. To ensure *transferability* of the study, a thorough account is provided of the analysed setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This helps readers of this study measure how suitable the findings are in a different context. *Dependability* is achieved by providing all the used material in this study: (i) the transcripts and coding frames are available for reading in a supplementary file; and (ii) topic lists and sample descriptions are found in the appendix (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Moreover, the process of this paper and the logic behind every decision and interpretation are thoroughly explained in the methods and results sections. Finally, *confirmability* is attained through the principle of reflexivity, i.e. by critically self-reflecting on the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). This ensures the trustworthiness of the research. Together, these four criteria ensure transparency and systematicity which make this research valid.

3.6. Ethics

The research touches on several sensitive and personal topics such as race and identity. For that reason, measures were put into place to ensure the comfort of the participants and to prevent possible ethical issues. The steps that were taken focus on the transparency of the study, the confidentiality and protection of participants and interviewees, and the fair analysis of data (Flick, 2011a). All persons were extensively informed on the nature of the research. They were informed that sensitive topics such as race and media would be discussed, which gave them a chance to opt-out. The participants and interviewees were also reminded that all opinions were welcome and that they may speak their honest minds without disrespecting one another. Moreover, participants were informed that, if so desired, they were free to withdraw from the research at any point. Furthermore, it was noted multiple times that the focus groups and interviews were being tape-recorded for transcription and usage in the research. The participants and interviewees, therefore, were offered the condition of anonymity, i.e. pseudonyms were used in all instances. In order to ensure proper conduct, the participants and interviewees were instructed to read and sign an informed consent form approved by the Ethics Committee of EUR before the start of the focus groups and interviews. Finally, the resulting data was analysed in a non-judgmental and objective manner to ensure fair treatment.

4. Results and discussion

This study explores how students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds in the Netherlands make sense of the characters, portrayals, and storylines presented in the series *Dear White People* (2017-). With the use of thematic analysis, six key themes are formed. These themes are presented and discussed in the subsequent sections. Following the structure of this research, the focus group results are tackled first. Hereafter, the results of the in-depth interviews are examined.

4.1. Results and discussion: focus groups

4.1.1. Representation of black people in entertainment media

One of the themes that arose from the three focus groups is the representation of black people in television shows. During the sessions, participants were asked if they could name three **black-led television shows** they had seen. The responses that followed suggest that racial/ethnic background plays a role in their viewing behaviour. Five out of six black participants easily named shows such as *Atlanta* (2016-), *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017), and *Empire* (2015-). Only one black person did not manage to name three. The white participants experienced more difficulty naming three shows: only two out of seven managed to do so. Three of them named *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-), and two named no show at all. As for the two other minority participants, the Chinese-Dutch person named three, and the Turkish-Dutch⁷ person could name none. On average, black people named 2.8, other minority participants named 1.5, and the white persons named 1.3 shows.

Several reasons were given by the white participants for their difficulties with naming shows. Robin said that she had a hard time remembering everything she had seen. Emma remarked that she does not pay active attention to someone's race. Thus, she could not remember many examples. The most recurring response, however, was that black-led shows are rare. Odette named America's history of black marginalisation as the culprit. Celine mentioned that she is not exposed to black-led shows and wondered whether such shows get any visibility on streaming services. Finally, Coen, Daphne, and Robin remarked that the main reason for the lack of black-led shows is that most series relegate black people to supporting roles.

“Normally (...) black people tend to play a supporting role, not a leading role.” (Robin, white female)

In support, Coen highlighted the fact that black-led shows tend to have a majority black cast. As these are not viewed as often by white people, it makes sense to him that white participants have not seen many black-led shows. This point was reaffirmed by Odette as she noted that she generally avoids shows with a majority black cast as she believes that they are not aimed at her. She thinks that she might relate less to it.

⁷ The Turkish-Dutch person noted that she primarily watches programming from Turkey. As Turkey has a tiny portion of black residents, it is unlikely they are extensively represented in Turkish programming. Therefore, this reply is to be expected (Lerner & Whitehouse, 2017).

Coen also remarked that *Luther (2010-)* is unique as it is a black-led show without a majority black cast. Therefore, it is viewed more frequently by white people:

“If you look at *Luther (2010-)*, he is the lead in there but (...) all the supporting characters are white people. (...) So that is a really distinct example. But if you look at (...) *Atlanta (2016-)*. The whole cast is black. Eh, there aren't (...) much [sic] series like *Luther (2010-)* where there is one black lead with (...) white roles in supporting. (...) And those [majority black] series aren't really our go-to media.”
(Coen, white male)

He seems to make a valid point upon taking a closer look at the mentions of series. Only two out of nine mentions (22%) by white participants, which were both solely mentioned by Coen himself, had a majority black cast. The other seven mentions were of black-led shows without a majority black cast. For black participants, the results were reversed: 14 out of 17 mentions (82%) were of majority black shows. As for the Chinese-Dutch person, two of the three shows she mentioned were majority black shows.

Based on these results, it seems that there is a clear divide between black and white participants. The white participants watch, either consciously or unconsciously, more white-led series. The black participants instead seem to watch more black-led shows. That does not mean that they watch only black-led programming, but they watch more of them than the white participants do. When asked, five out of six black participants noted that they make an effort to give new black-led shows a try. For comparison: there was no white participant that gives a white-led show a try purely based on shared racial identity. The Asian-Dutch participant also remarked that she tries to watch minority-led shows. Whether that be Asian-led or black-led series. The Turkish-Dutch person primarily views media from Turkey. Although not explicitly mentioned by her, it indicates that she prefers media content that lies closer to her own ethnic identity. As such, it seems evident that race representation matters more so to black and other minority people.

The remarks of the black people indicate awareness of their own racial background and its difference to mainstream white Western society. Their comments also suggest that they enjoy and are interested in seeing their own race represented on screen, which corresponds with previous findings (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Baynes, 2003; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Fujioka, 2005; Ward, 2004). As for the other minority participants, the results signal overlap with the black respondents as they too displayed conscious awareness of their difference to mainstream society. This, therefore, results in a (sub)conscious preference for non-white media (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Fujioka, 2005).

The responses from the white participants stand in stark contrast with the non-white people. Their comments indicate that they do not experience feelings of underrepresentation or experience an othering of their racial identity. Most seem to take a race-blind approach in their TV viewing, meaning that they do not (consciously) notice the lead character's race, or do not feel the need to consciously choose a show based on

race. As such, corresponding with previous studies, they do not experience a conscious need for racial representation and seemingly lack awareness of their own whiteness (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Fujioka, 2005; Guess, 2006). White people in western society are not othered based on their racial identity (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Fujioka, 2005; Guess, 2006). As such, it makes sense that their viewing behaviour is less so (consciously) influenced by race.

There is, however, another factor that might explain the small amount of black-led shows that white participants watched. Celine pondered whether black-led shows perhaps get less visibility on Netflix than white-led shows. That might be true as Netflix tailors their recommendations based on one's past viewing behaviour (Tiku, 2018). In 2018, Netflix was accused of targeting black subscribers with thumbnails featuring black cast members to make the person more likely to watch it. Flip this around, and one can see how this mechanism can achieve the effect of only targeting white-led content to white subscribers (Quico, 2019). Doing so can limit exposure to black-led content. As eight out of the 15 participants explicitly mentioned Netflix recommendations as a source of new content, one can wonder what the impact might be.

After the topic of black-led shows, the discussion transitioned to **black actors/actresses**. The participants were asked to think of one white and one black actor/actress and write down three characteristics of the type of characters they typically play. Hereafter, they were asked whether they noticed any differences in what they wrote down. The responses varied. Some did not notice remarkable differences. Others did.

One black participant noted that the black person she picked is always portrayed as crazy and funny, whereas the white person she picked is always portrayed as a gentleman and smart. That coincides with literature that found that black people tend to be relegated to sitcoms and typecast as a funny character, whereas white people are overrepresented in dramas which, generally, give characters a more well-rounded treatment (Greenberg et al., 2002; Hunt et al., 2019; Mastro, 2009; Signorielli, 2004, 2009a; Ward, 2004; Wilson et al., 2013). Another white participant remarked that the black person she picked plays subservient supporting roles, whereas the white person plays the leading roles. That also coincides with traditional role distributions (Brown, 2016; De Bruin, 2005; Fuller, 2010; Hunt et al., 2019). Another white participant noted that the white actor she picked is very versatile and, consequently, she was unable to point out three characteristics. The same participant noted that the black actor she picked always plays the calm and wise old guy that supports others. Based on those remarks, she suggested that black actors may have fewer chances to show their versatility. Her observations also coincide with literature that documents the preference for white leads and the “helping hand to the white lead” trope of the black man (Brown, 2016; De Bruin, 2005; Fuller, 2010; Hunt et al., 2019; Nelson, 1998, 2008). One of the two other minority persons remarked how the black actress she picked is always portrayed as a loud and funny woman, whereas the white actress is more so portrayed as a pretty and funny woman. The loud black woman and the pretty white woman are also known

stereotypes (Brown, 2016; Nelson, 1998, 2008). It seems that, based on these responses, racial background plays no role in documenting recurring tropes and stereotypes.

In conclusion, data from the focus groups highlights that most black and other minority participants consciously care about racial representation, whereas the white participants do not. The difference can be explained through the fact that white people are used to seeing themselves widely represented on television and film, whereas black and other minority people are not (Baynes, 2003; Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Fujioka, 2005, Guess, 2006; Hunt et al., 2019; Mastro, 2009, 2017; Mastro & Greenberg; 2000). Given their underrepresentation, black and other minority people explicitly seek out content with non-white leads. It differs for white persons, as the white-led show is the norm (Hunt et al., 2019). As for the discussion of black actors/actresses, no difference was documented in responses amongst the participants. The differential treatment of black actors/actresses was noticed regardless of background. That could be due to the fact that noticing the types of roles that actors play does not require specific prior knowledge about race and representation.

4.1.2. Making sense of *Dear White People* (2017-)

A key element from the focus group sessions was how the different focus group members responded to the clips⁸⁹ and how they made sense of the scenes. In the next few paragraphs, the responses and interpretations are dissected.

The show's **tone** was the topic that arose after viewing the first clip. Participants in every group lauded the satirical, comedic, and smart writing, especially in its handling of (racially tinted) **social issues**. For instance, Odette said that the show's approach to discussing social issues is smart and refreshing:

“I think it's really smart. (...) The way it's written is pretty cool and, of course, when I watched the trailer, I already knew it was pretty provocative. And for some people, they are not gonna be happy with it. But I think it's nice (...) because people are afraid to say these things. (...) They are walking on eggshells. (...) It's pretty rare to see someone say it in a TV show.” (Odette, white female)

Based on such first general remarks on social issues, participants started sharing their own real-life experiences with different racial treatments. Black respondents discussed how they had experienced something similar themselves, whilst some white respondents noted that they had black friends who had experienced something comparable to what was displayed. Overall, everybody, regardless of background, was positive and receptive of the tone and how the show addresses racial themes. That can be a big issue (e.g. police brutality) or a small one (e.g. white people touching black people's hair without permission). Some

⁸ An explanation of each clip's purpose is provided in section 3.3.

⁹ Appendix D contains descriptions of the clips' contents.

participants, however, noted that the show and its title might be too confrontational for prejudiced (white) audience members.

The discussion about the representation of social issues extended throughout the sessions. A recurring theme was that of **misunderstanding**. Participants noted that the main reason that racial issues persist is that people are uninformed and do not listen to others. For instance, when black people try to communicate something that hurts them, white people are frequently unreceptive. Either because they cannot relate to things such as racism or because they are uninformed about non-white issues. This theme was especially dominant when participants were shown the second clip. Multiple participants remarked that the clip displayed a clear example of white people not listening to black people and, instead, jumping to ignorant conclusions. Concerning the clip, Daphne pointed out how white people tend to lack understanding of how the n-word¹⁰ is hurtful to some black people:

“Well, I think it's (...) a clear example of something that, I think, happens quite often actually. When I think white people don't really understand the weight of the word and what it means if they say it. (...) I think this is (...) a clear example of when it might occur.” (Daphne, white female)

All the black and other minority participants agreed with this point of misunderstanding whilst also unanimously agreeing with the fact that only black people should say the word.

The white people were a bit more mixed during the discussion: three out of seven leaned towards the other side by defending the actions of the white character that said the n-word. Maarten stated that the white character was doing a good job by starting an argument with the black character about the n-word. He argued that simply accepting the black character's request not to say the word would be wrong. Robin pointed out that she does not understand the problem with the word either as it is in the song. However, she pointed out that, unlike the clip's white character, she would listen to someone's request in order to be respectful. Furthermore, Emma was equally confused about the matter and supported comments made by Maarten and Robin.

Such remarks suggest that awareness is not universal when it comes to sensitive matters such as the use of the n-word. The black participants displayed a lot of awareness of racial issues. Seemingly because it relates to their identity as black people. Some of them pointed out that they had engaged in multiple discussions on sensitive topics with white people. Five out of six black participants noted the lack of understanding that white people show when it comes to racism. As for the other minority participants, they were partly aware of

¹⁰ The n-word refers to “nigger”, which is a racial slur directed at black people. Over the years, it has become taboo to utter the word in modern (American) society as a non-black person. Since a few decades, the word has been re-appropriated and repurposed by black rappers in its modern variation “nigga”. It is now used amongst black people with more positive meanings such as “friend” or “brother”. The word has gone mainstream following the worldwide popularisation of hip hop and rap music.

the issues pertaining to black people. In case they were not, they still displayed much understanding of the black characters as they could relate on a certain level as a problematised ethnic or religious minority. These findings correspond with the Group Empathy Theory, which posits that groups with similar experiences, such as marginalisation, display more empathy to one another (Sirin, Villalobos, & Valentino, 2016). For the white participants, three of them displayed a limited amount of understanding. The other four white participants displayed more understanding. Odette, one of the latter four, actually remarked how she used to be an uninformed person:

“I think it is interesting that he says, ‘you’re calling me a racist’ because no one likes to be called a racist. It’s very hard to hear (...) that you hurt someone’s feelings or that you... Cause obviously it wasn’t his intention. But (...) I think it’s interesting that they put it in because it is a discussion that is always happening, like, who can say the word. (...) I used to also be a little ignorant and be like (...) it is in the song. (...) But (...) the word has so much history and so much that [negative] connotation that it’s... yeah. So, I think that (...) it’s good that they put that in there.” (Odette, white female)

Unequal treatment of black people was another point of discussion among participants of the focus groups. This point took various forms such as censorship and victim-blaming. For instance, after seeing a clip, Celine immediately remarked:

“Yeah, it just shows (...) the current unfairness that’s happening in the U.S. and I think the different treatments based on your (...) skin colour. And (...) that has been happening for a long time.”
(Celine, white female)

Even though almost all the participants picked up what the show was trying to display in these clips, not everybody drew the same conclusions. The points of view varied based on background. Everybody picked up on the theme of unequal treatment but some occasionally implied that the victims were white people rather than black people. One such topic that came about was that of censorship. Five out of seven white participants expressed their concerns about political correctness. They said that they cannot make any remarks about minorities anymore without being accused of being a racist. In arguing so, three of the white participants implied that black people are just victimising themselves and that the actual victims are the white people that must censor themselves. These comments correspond with previous findings that illustrate how white people, especially ones that live and move in overwhelmingly white spaces, think ‘anti-white’ racism is a larger problem than anti-black racism (Cabrera, 2014; Hammon, 2013; Norton & Sommers, 2011). However, their comments got some pushback. Chiara, for instance, noted that white people tend to use the disclaimer “I am not racist but...” as an excuse to just say something racist. As documented by Bonilla-Silva (2002), it is a common method employed by white people to say something racist. Chiara also pointed out how white people misinterpret what black people want; and she emphasised black people's effort to attain the same status as white people, rather than put them down:

“But I think (...) white people (...) have to realise, (...) the cause that we're fighting for is not to bring them down. It's so we could get to the same level. Like just be treated equally. (...) Cause that's not happening right now. And most white people have a problem with that or just don't wanna admit that that's a thing. (...) We're fighting for the same rights, even gay people, they're fighting just for the same rights. (...) Just (...) to be able to get married legally and all that stuff. (...) We're not fighting you. We just want the same thing.” (Chiara, black female)

Coen reaffirmed this point and argued that white people are currently just engaging in a sort of **“oppression Olympics”** by trying to steal the narrative from the actual victims. Coen found support from two other white participants in his comments. As such, white respondents were divided on this topic, whereas black and other minority participants were more clear-cut about it. Five out six black persons and both the other minority respondents noted that the people that are actually being censored are the black people. Sabine, for instance, noted how black people speak out about racism and, in turn, get punished for doing so:

“In the first scene, (...) black people say something to the white people that bothers them. And [the] next scene they're being punished for saying something.” (Sabine, other minority female)

Sabine and those black participants noted how the series portrays pain that is unique to being black. Speaking out about things is hard as black people get **silenced** by the majority white populace when doing so. As such, black people are the actual victims in the series and, by extension, in real life. The conversation that followed saw the majority of the participants remarking how black people are mistreated, discriminated, and stereotyped. They noted how biased society is against them and how black people have limits to their self-expression due to consequences that can come with doing so. The respondents remarked how taxing it can be on one's mental well-being to always be perceived as the other, as different, or even as a threat. Coen made an especially striking remark on this topic by noting how black people are welcome until they speak up about something they do not like:

“Well, what I really like is (...), his white friend says, ‘all you do is come here uninvited and cause drama’. While Reggie was just trying to indicate that he doesn't like a word. And I guess people of colour might feel that they are uninvited somewhere and try to stir drama when they are just trying to defend themselves against things they don't like. And for a white person, you wouldn't say ‘you just show up here and stir drama’ when he would say he doesn't like something.” (Coen, white male)

When discussing the topic, participants remarked how white people and black people experience the world differently. Black people move in white spaces. Therefore, black people are aware of their difference and have to take their blackness into account with everything they do. White people, however, are not limited by their whiteness as whiteness is the norm. As such, they are free to do whatever they want and are not limited by their racial background. Several participants called this **entitlement** of white people as they do not

consider that non-white people experience the world differently and do not take them into account. Ela remarked how the series reflects that real-life aspect:

“I find the scene quite confronting, but it's good that they put it in the show. I find it typical for some white people to be so egocentric and not take others into account. In the meantime, they live their lives however they want. In that sense, this scene was an eye-opener for me... (...) I am really bothered by that entitlement and I see that reflected in this scene. Always just thinking of yourself and never... Look, we live with this idea that ‘you can do whatever you want’, but you must also always take others into account. Because you do not live on an uninhabited island where you can do whatever you want. (...) I saw that idea represented in this scene.” (Ela, other minority female)¹¹

Next, when discussing unequal treatment, the topic of **clothing** came about in two very distinct ways within two of the focus groups. In the black focus group, the participants shared the awareness of their own skin colour and how they might be perceived negatively due to that. They shared how they try to look as pleasant as possible to avoid being seen as hostile by white people. In the white focus group, talk turned to clothing as well, but in the complete opposite way. Rather than talking about how they themselves can be perceived, they talked about their perceptions of black people. Five out of the six participants remarked that the black character that gets brutalised by a cop should have worn something different to avoid it:

“Cause I think if the black guy was wearing... I don't know. Maybe a suit perhaps. Then, he would also look different.” (Emma, white female)

This talk continued throughout the focus group, and participants kept blaming issues of discrimination on the fact that the black character was wearing black attire, rather than blaming it on racism or bias. They were somehow justifying the actions of the white characters and ended up **victim-blaming**. This talk mirrored the narrative following the fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin by a white cop (Giroux, 2012; Nguyen, 2015; Obasogie & Newman, 2016). Then also, the narrative centred on the fact he wore a hoodie, which allegedly prompted a stronger response from the cop. Therefore, the contrast between the white and the black focus groups was significant. On the one hand, there is a group of black people that actively change themselves to accommodate white people. On the other hand, there is a group of white people arguing that black people should change their appearance to be perceived as less hostile and, as such, justifying police brutality for failing to do so. As for the mixed focus group, the topic evolved differently. The black and other coloured participants shared how they feel perceived negatively and how that affects their behaviour and mental well-being. When the white participants heard this, they were surprised and responded empathically by noting how they had not realised what non-white people were going through. As such,

¹¹ This quote has been translated from Dutch into English by the researcher.

putting different people together led to people learning something new. Whereas, when the white and black people were split, there was no pushback against any statements.

As such, there was a discord throughout the viewing sessions between the black, other minority and some white participants, on one side, and the remaining white respondents, on the other side. The *former* seemed to engage in the preferred readings of the clips as the black and other minority people related to the contents of the clips and understood what they were trying to communicate (Sirin et al., 2016). For instance, most of the clips tried to show how black people try to express their problems and their feelings but they get in trouble for doing so. This resonated with these participants given their own experiences as a minority (Sirin et al., 2016). In talking about the show, they made references to their own or their friends' stories and remarked how truthful the show was to reality. Some of the white respondents also fell in this former group as well. A few of these respondents clearly displayed knowledge on the topic as they pointed out in numerous ways how realistic the show was in depicting racial problems (Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013).

Regarding the *latter*, which existed of only white people, the responses were more ambiguous. These participants did not always engage in the preferred reading but also took oppositional or negotiated stances. A clear example was when clip #3 was shown. Despite initially denouncing the actions of the cop, talk quickly turned to the clothes or the looks of the character. As briefly mentioned, this seems to coincide with the responses that followed the Black Lives Matter debate in the United States (Carney, 2016). Multiple instances were seen where the respondents empathised with the white characters or demonised the black characters, despite the show's intentions to create empathy and fuel understanding for black people (BaVaro, 2018; Ugwu, 2018; Wilson, 2019). As such, their own real-life experiences, and perhaps the lack of relevant ones, changed their understanding of the show. These participants most likely find themselves on the white side of racial debates in real life, which clearly influences the way they interpret the show (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Jungkunz, & White, 2013; Mills, 2007). Of note, however, is that the distinctions were not always clear cut. They tended to go back and forth on their comments, which is not uncommon for people that have not spent much time thinking on specific issues (Bonam, Nair Das, Coleman, & Salter, 2019; Essed & Hoving, 2014; Mills, 2007). In contrast, the white respondents that engaged in the preferred reading seem to have spent quite some time reading up on the topic and therefore displayed a more comprehensive range of knowledge and understanding of multiple sides of racial debates (Bonam et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2013).

In conclusion, findings suggest that there is a split between meaning-making processes of white, black, and other minority people. The former group, which predominantly consisted of black, other minority, and a portion of white people, engaged in the preferred reading. The latter group, which consisted of some white participants, varied between the readings. The meanings and the issues were not as clear cut for the latter group. They tended to go back and forth on their responses and displayed less knowledge on the topic. As documented, denial of racism and race-related issues is linked to a lack of awareness, which might explain

why their responses (Bonam et al., 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Cabrera, 2014; Hammon, 2013; Nelson et al., 2013; Norton & Sommers, 2011).

4.1.3. Relatability and the roles of race and personal background

A key theme from the focus group sessions was the topic of identification and the role that race plays herein. Discussions were held on whether race matters or not when relating to characters and stories. The next few paragraphs first present a general discussion on the topic prior to watching clips from *Dear White People* (2017-). Hereafter, the focus is brought back to the show and the participants' comments in order to examine their actual responses, i.e. who responds to what? And in what ways do the participants respond?

The focus group participants were asked about the role that race plays, if any, in their television viewing behaviour. In other words, whether they could relate with characters that do not share the same skin colour; whether they care about seeing racial diversity on television; and whether they prefer a specific race in shows. The responses to the question were mixed. Four out of seven of the white respondents remarked that **race does not matter** to them when watching a show. They noted, however, that they watched mostly white-led shows. Thus, it might unconsciously play a role. Perhaps due to assumptions of sameness:

“I think you then assume that they are like you. But maybe they are very different than you are and maybe someone who's (...) Asian is [more] similar to you? So, I guess that's something your mind does.” (Emma, white female)

Daphne supported this observation by stating, from the shows she watched, she related to the white characters more than other characters. Coen noted **stereotypes** as the issue:

“For me, it doesn't really matter that much [but] (...) whenever a stereotype is used you can't unsee the stereotype from the ethnicity. So, then it becomes really hard to relate.” (Coen, white male)

Robin agreed to not being able to relate to stereotypical minority characters. Finally, only one out of six black respondents explicitly stated that race does not play a role in his television viewing habits. He did not give any reason for this. However, from his other responses within the focus group, it seems evident that he does not strongly identify as “black” and therefore cares less about the race of the characters. The five other black respondents gave a more **mixed response** to the question. For instance:

“I think I also don't specifically choose it on that, but then... when they do have the large African American cast type. So, to say. Like, I do relate to it at times. Like, for instance, *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2009). You can really feel Chris' role in the family. Like, you know the mother and dad, and you're like ‘ok cool.’” (Ngoni, black male)

Similar to Ngoni, the other four respondents all initially stated race does not matter, meaning that they watch shows with other races and can relate either way. However, they all said that race does matter in the

sense that they all watch new shows with majority black casts. They watch them either out of curiosity, because they like to see diversity, or because they can relate to it more so than with white characters.

Finally, two respondents explicitly stated that **race does matter** in their TV viewing choices. Odette, one of the seven white respondents, noted that she is less inclined to watch a show with a black cast. She argued that she relates more with characters that share her race/ethnicity. Sabine, the Asian-Dutch person, also noted that she loves to see diversity on screen and specifically watches shows that contain Asian or black people for that reason.

Based on the mixed responses to the question of race, two deductions can be made. Firstly, the majority of white respondents said that race does not matter when choosing a show and that the race of the character does not interfere in relating to characters. At the same time, they noted that they tend to, consciously or unconsciously, relate more with the white characters. As such, it seems like the initial response might be a socially desired one (Noelle-Neumann, 1977; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). However, the comments made afterwards illustrate more relevant reply, namely that race does unconsciously play a role. Secondly, the majority of black people said they (try to) watch majority black shows. From this, it can be deduced that they give those shows a watch because of the racial makeup of the show and not merely because the genre or the story interests them. There is no equivalent argument on this from the white respondents. In other words: both white and black respondents watch shows based on their specific tastes and preferences. However, the black respondents also watch some shows solely for their racial makeup. The care for skin colour from the black respondents makes sense as their race is not as represented on television shows (Hunt et al., 2019). The lack of care from the white respondents for race also makes sense given that most shows contain a majority white cast or a white lead (Hunt et al., 2019). Therefore, race seems to play a rather insignificant role in their television show choices. In this context, the response from the Asian-Dutch respondent can also be understood. She stated that she enjoys watching non-white shows, especially shows with an Asian lead. Given that Asians are also underrepresented in American shows, it is an understandable desire (Hunt et al., 2019). The response of the Turkish-Dutch respondent, namely that she primarily watches Turkish entertainment, also neatly fits into the desire to see oneself represented and enjoy content that is more culturally proximate (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Fujioka, 2005; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

After these initial discussions, the focus groups moved to the series *Dear White People* (2017-). The respondents watched six clips from the series and were asked to respond to the series. These responses revealed another layer to the relatability and race discussion. As explained in the following paragraphs, it is telling that race does indeed play a role when identifying with, relating to, and understanding the characters. At least, when it comes to the series *Dear White People* (2017-).

The theme of **relatability** came about several times in each of the focus groups. However, it is who and what the interviewees related to that shows a particular gap between the white respondents and the black and

other minority respondents. The black and other minority respondents very much related to the black characters in the clips. For instance, the first response in the *black focus group* after watching the first clip was:

“Relatable, relatable, relatable.” (Zara, black female)

Throughout the focus groups, there was a recurring pattern of black interviewees relating to what was happening to the black characters in the clips. They either had experienced it themselves, had a friend that experienced it, or were aware of the fact that people with their racial makeup were experiencing it. For instance, Boaz related to the fact that on his university, they force the coloured students to pose for pictures to present itself as diverse just like they do in the show. Ngoni, Zara, and Boaz all related to the scene where the black character asks the white character not to say the n-word as it is hurtful. Zara, Memphis, Boaz and Ngoni noted how they related to how a black character felt about being black and being perceived as different and as a potential threat. For instance:

“I have never really consciously crossed the street, but I have kept, at night, my hoodie off (...) just because me without a hoodie looks a bit more normal and less (...) dangerous.” (Boaz, black male)

There were a couple more instances within the focus group where Ngoni, Zara, Boaz, and Memphis related to the clips and how they experienced being black. Therefore, it seems like the show does an excellent job at portraying real-life experiences of black people. The only person who could not relate was Menno. This could be attributed to the fact that he is mixed race and very light-skinned and therefore would not be recognised as black by most people. It has been documented that light-skinned people experience significantly less discrimination than dark-skinned people (Klonoff & Landrine, 2000). As such, Menno's racial experiences would be different from the other participants, which helps explain his reactions.

In the case of the *white focus group*, the participants frequently focused on the white characters. They tended to relate with the white characters and to what they were experiencing rather than focusing on the perspective of the black characters. For instance, with the n-word scene, the black participants all noted that they related to what the black character was experiencing and how white people do not understand that saying the n-word is hurtful. In the white focus group, some showed awareness of how offensive it can be whilst others did not display this kind of awareness. Several persons actually related to the white character saying the n-word and not liking being called a racist:

“Yeah, I think that he says that he's so scared to be called a racist is very... you see that in, I mean, my, I've heard people say things about black people and then it's like ‘but I'm not a racist’. But just ‘in this case or something, it's always black people.’ ‘Something like this, it's...’. So, I think you hear that a lot. But people are scared to be called a racist if they say anything about someone with a colour or...” (Emma, white female)

One clip showed a character talking about being perceived as a threat by white people because he is a tall black male. When asked for their responses, the majority of the white group talked about how they could relate to not feeling safe at night when walking through a “diverse” neighbourhood. In contrast, the majority of the black group related to being perceived as dangerous because of their skin colour. The white participants then tried to argue that they would feel unsafe with a sketchy-looking white person with tattoos as well and that it is not someone's skin colour that they are afraid of. Their comments on diverse neighbourhoods, however, imply that black people are sketchy by nature. As mentioned in the previous section, the same thing also happened when some white participants tried to blame clothing rather than skin colour when a black character got harassed by police in one of the clips. Even going as far as suggesting that it would not have happened if he had worn a suit. That somehow implies that black people are at fault if they are the victim of police brutality. Based on this, it seems that there are clear divisions between the responses by the white participants and the responses by the black participants.

In the discussions, the black participants seemed way more understanding of the issues that the black people were facing in the series, whilst clearly relating to them. The white focus group participants were more split on this case. A portion of the interviewees seemed aware and understanding of the social issues that were portrayed in the clips. However, in terms of relatability, all seven participants seemed to relate with the white characters in the clips. The abovementioned division was not only present between the white and the black focus groups, but also in the *mixed focus group*. Here the group was split between the white people, on the one hand, and the black and other minority people, on the other hand. The white people were trying to be understanding of the black characters. The black and other minority people were, however, relating to the black characters. An interesting example was that of Ela, a hijab-wearing Turkish-Dutch female, who related to the feeling of otherness as described by one black male character in a scene from the show:

“Of course, I'm part of a minority group myself. (...) But when I'm on vacation in Turkey, for example, I feel so free because I don't stand out. So even when I walk through red, I don't feel guilty or (...) stared at or something like that” (Ela, other minority female)¹²

As such, the interesting difference with the other two groups was that the white persons in the mixed group were trying to be understanding of their group members' feelings.

Next, even though an analysis of how **gender** shapes people's interpretations is out of the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning that there seems to be a division between how men and women respond to and understand the show. Some white females tried to make sense of the black characters' experiences by reflecting on their feelings as a woman in a male-dominated world. Emma, for instance, pointed out how being unwantedly touched by a man is different for her as a woman than it would be for a man:

¹² This quote has been translated from Dutch into English by the researcher.

“My boyfriend told me he was going out, and he said that a guy touched his butt. And then he said he was (...) as offended as I would be when I was [sic] touched by a guy. But I really didn't agree because he didn't have like the fear of [getting] raped or touched further. And as a girl, you do.”
(Emma, white female)

Other female participants, such as Robin and Daphne, agreed with this point. Robin pointed out that there are differences between actions and consequences, depending on one's social position as a woman or person of colour. She pointed out that she, as a white person, is not offended by jokes about white people but, as a woman, she is offended by sexist jokes. This point was reaffirmed by three other white participants. As such, the lack of a marginalised minority experience seems to condition a lack of understanding of discrimination. A study by Graça, Calheiros, Oliveira, and Milfont (2018) suggests that, indeed, social position influences empathy: women are more likely to display empathy than men. Looking at this study's participants, similar observations can be made. For instance, Maarten, a white heterosexual male, did not show a particular understanding of the reasoning from the female participants or the reasoning of the black characters. Most likely explained by the fact that he does not have experiences of marginalisation as do certain racial or gendered minorities (Bonam et al., 2019; McIntosh, 2018; Nelson et al., 2013). As such, these comments also seem to provide further support for the Group Empathy Theory (Sirin et al., 2016).

To summarise, it seems that white people tend to relate more so to the white characters from the clips whilst also trying to understand what is happening to the black characters. Black people tend to relate more so to what is happening to the black characters and are already understanding of what is happening. The other minority respondents also seem to relate to the black characters due to overlapping feelings of otherness, being perceived negatively or as a threat, and having to prove they are “one of the good ones”. As such, these findings provide further support for Group Empathy Theory, which posits that intergroup attitudes are more positive when group experiences overlap (Sirin et al., 2016). These findings also overlap with the findings in the previous sections, where white people tended to engage in negotiated or oppositional readings of the texts and black and other minority people tended to engage in the dominant readings (Hall, 2012). This means that not only do the participants engage in differential readings of the show but also relate more so to the storylines and characters that somehow relate to their own lives and experiences. With white people making sense of stories from their experiences as a white person and the black and other minority people making sense of the stories from their experiences as a minority. As such, these findings also support the cultural proximity argument, which posits that viewers prefer content that corresponds with their own views and culture (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Finally, the females of the group occasionally tried to make sense of the stories by reflecting on their own position as a woman in a male-dominated society, which led to them engaging in more negotiated readings than some men did. As such, providing further insights into how social position influences empathy towards others (Graça et al., 2018).

4.2. Results and discussion: interviews

4.2.1. Representation of black people in *Dear White People* (2017-)

Representation is the main focus of this project. As such, the topic is extensively discussed during the interviews. The resulting comments are dissected in the following paragraphs.

Concerning the portrayal of black people, every single interviewee remarked how **humanising** the portrayals in *Dear White People* (2017-) are in comparison to other shows and movies they had seen. They noted that black actors/actresses are frequently relegated to one-dimensional or stereotypical characters such as thugs and criminals. *Dear White People* (2017-) instead portrays black people as three-dimensional characters with their own feelings, problems, and desires. One interviewee explained it in the following way:

“It humanises (...) the black characters. (...) They're not stereotypes or anything. They are real people. They are dynamic. They make mistakes; they do good things. They have their own thoughts. (...) They just feel like real persons. They don't feel like (...) actors. And you see in (...) Hollywood or wherever. (...) It's more difficult for a black character to get a (...) dynamic role (...) and not be portrayed as a (...) stereotype. So, this series (...) did very well with this.” (Coen, white male)

Furthermore, four of the six interviewees explicitly mentioned the diversity within the series as another significant point of difference between this and other shows featuring black characters. According to the interviewees, the characters in the series are not defined by their blackness. Instead, each character has his or her own distinct traits and opinions. Therefore, in comparison to other shows, *Dear White People* (2017-) does not portray black people as a monolithic group. Instead, it is a unique showcase of **black diversity**. Hoang described it like this:

“I think they did a good job by having (...) several characters. Every character is different. (...) They had a wide range of personalities that (...) they could project. Even though they were all black. It was not just a group with black people and other people. It was (...) black x, black y, black z. All different kinds of black. (...) They did (...) a great job by having several personalities.” (Hoang, other minority male)

Joanne and Anjali explicitly mentioned the difference in **role distribution**. They remarked how other shows typically feature a white leading character; how black people typically play supporting characters; or how black characters tend to be killed off early on. The spotlight typically belongs to white characters with black characters used as disposable support. They noted how *Dear White People* (2017-) is the polar opposite of all of that. The show instead puts black people at the centre of attention and gives them the same care and importance as white leading characters typically get.

Joanne remarked how the series does an excellent job at casting characters by not engaging in **colourism**, i.e. the preference for light-skinned black actors/actresses over dark-skinned ones. She noted that

other shows and movies have been critiqued for choosing light-skinned people to portray dark-skinned people:

“I think the casting was done really good. Cause sometimes you (...) hear people commenting on films or series where the actress or the actor is supposed to be a black person, and then the actor playing the person is actually really light-skinned or something along those lines. And I think that that wasn't the case in *Dear White People* (2017-). So, for representing African American people, I think they did a good job.” (Joanne, white female)

Regarding the topic of black stereotypes, five out of six interviewees noted the absence of negative ones in *Dear White People* (2017-). The participants pointed out that other shows, even majority black shows like *Empire* (2015-), overwhelmingly portray black people as thugs, criminals, or as the comic relief with exaggerated stereotypical character traits. *Dear White People* (2017-) instead displays black people as smart and educated without removing black elements such as their culture. For instance, Boaz noted that the characters solve their problems in a constructive, intelligent manner rather than with violence. He especially lauded the fact that there are no ambiguous characters with guns:

“What was interesting about the show and that's (...) what I did like about the show. They didn't have the... I don't know, the thug character or something. Because usually in (...) a show where you have black people, they're like, I don't know, 80% of the time... there's one that's super sketch. (...) That has guns and everything.” (Boaz, black male)

When further pressed on the topic of stereotypes, four out of six interviewees mentioned that, despite the absence of negative stereotypical characters, some of the characters do have stereotypical traits. Each of them noted, however, that these traits are smartly implanted to **subvert** the viewers' expectations later in the show. They named such examples as Lionel, who is a nerdy gay person; Coco, who is obsessed over her looks; or Troy, who is a popular athletic black guy that has mastered the art of respectability politics. Based on first impressions, those characters seem quite clichéd. During the series, however, they develop and show different sides of themselves. As Coen noted:

“Well, they (...) play with the stereotypes. (...) They set you up with like a stereotypical thing and then trick you because (...) it's not the stereotype. (...) It tries to (...) second guess your own (...) thinking on the stereotypes in that way. (...) I didn't like, uh, Reggie that much in the beginning because I didn't really knew [sic] what his deal was. And I thought, in the beginning, he was a (...) a stereotypical black guy who is angry and violent, but then he turned out not to be. So (...) that's (...) maybe an example how they play with the stereotypical.” (Coen, white male)

So far, all the interviewees focused on the differences in the representation of black people in *Dear White People* (2017-) in comparison to other shows. When inquired about potential **similarities** with other series, the

interviewees had trouble naming any. Four of the interviewees noted that they could not identify any. Boaz was the only one that could name explicit similarities between this show and others like *Power* (2014-) and *Empire* (2015-). He noted the portrayal of black culture and the topic of racism as two recurring elements that are generally done well:

“They did a very good job to portray, even in university, that they have a different style of talking to each other and greeting each other. Um, yeah, it was, of course, it's just culture, how they were brought up. So, they stuck that really well.” (Boaz, black male)

The responses varied when the rest was asked why they could not name any similarities. Some mentioned that they just had a hard time remembering characters from other shows. Others declared *Dear White People* (2017-) to simply be too different, both in its representation of black people and the stories it tells. Naming similar shows is therefore impossible.

Hereafter, interviewees were inquired about potential **improvements** the show could make in terms of representation or storylines. Two of the respondents noted that the black characters are frequently frustrated or are always trying to make the world a better place for black people. They worried that this might put off some, primarily white, viewers from watching the show as it could be seen as unpleasant or hostile. Nevertheless, they noted that this is inherent to the series itself given its focus on black identity and black issues.

“The only comment I could make about it is that a lot of, especially in the second season, (...) a lot of the characters are really frustrated and angry and I get it. (...) I mean like seeing everything that happened to them, (...) I get that you get frustrated and angry, but (...) they seemed frustrated and angry all the time.” (Alyssa, black female)

Another respondent mentioned that he understands that the focus lies on black and white people but noted that he would have enjoyed seeing more races/ethnicities represented.

Despite the focus on black representation, the topic of **white portrayals** became a significant part of some interviews. Two of the interviewees noted that, before watching the show, they were worried that the white characters were going to be portrayed as bad people. Instead, they were surprised at the amount of care put into them. Coen explicitly noted how much he enjoyed this. According to him, even some people that could be deemed as bad get a fair and nuanced portrayal:

“I think that the show also does a really good job of portraying other white people than (...) Gabe. Because (...) the white people that were offended by (...) the trailer. They also play a little bit with it in the series. (...) They showed that those persons are not necessarily bad or have bad intentions, but just feel offended, or they feel something is taken from them (...). It's (...) more a misunderstanding because I feel (...) that people are not bad inherently, but there's just a lot of misunderstanding and (...) a lack of knowledge. And that's why we need a series like *Dear White People* (2017-) to give us

different perspectives and see how (...) this racial tension got so high and that we should all (...) calm down a bit.” (Coen, white male)

All in all, the interviewees were positive and receptive of the representation of black people and the portrayals of black people in *Dear White People* (2017-). None could name significant similarities between it and other shows, which reaffirms that it is doing a good job.

4.2.2. Relatability and the roles of race and personal background

The second key theme during the interviews consisted of three connected elements: identification with the characters; the role that race plays in relating to and understanding what the characters in *Dear White People* (2017-) are going through; and the influence of the interviewees' own identity on their perception and understanding of the series. These are dissected and discussed in the following paragraphs.

The most mentioned storyline during the interviews was that of Reggie getting a gun pulled on him by campus security. As that is perhaps the most significant moment in the series, it is more interesting to look at other **meaningful/memorable storylines** that were mentioned (Obell, 2017). Five out of the six interviewees explicitly mentioned a storyline that resonated with them due to an aspect of their own identity. They mentioned storylines that were somehow linked to their gender or race. Specific storylines resonated with them because they had experienced something alike or because they might experience something similar in the future. For instance, Joanne mentioned how a storyline about pregnancy and abortion resonated with her. Not because she ever had to make such a decision herself, but because, as a woman, she might face such a difficult decision herself someday. Boaz mentioned how the racism aspect reflects the real online and offline world. Both in the United States and the Netherlands. He also stated that the racism storylines in *Dear White People* (2017-) resonated with him as a black person. Hoang mentioned, although he is neither black nor white, he could relate as a minority:

“I am Vietnamese myself, so yeah, there could be a lot of Chinese jokes and all that. (...) Sometimes my friends don't understand that it's (...) maybe too much, you know. Even though we are good friends, so yeah, (...) I can imagine that it's how Reggie felt.” (Hoang, other minority male)

Given the fact that so many respondents focused on race and gender in their comments, the discussion was moved to the topic of relatability and the role that race plays herein. The responses were mixed. As a first response, some said that **race matters**. Five out of the six interviewees initially expressed that race plays some role when relating to characters. The two white respondents, for instance, said that they could obviously not relate to black-specific problems as they were white. The Asian respondent also said that he favours Asian characters. The Indo-Surinamese interviewee said the same thing about identifying with people that reflect her background. Boaz, however, shared a more nuanced and elaborate view on the topic:

“I moved to Singapore for ten years. I was one of those (...) kids who didn't really know where home was. So, was it Holland? Was it Singapore? Or was it America? (...) So, if someone in the show would move to another country and feel (...) not sure [of] what to call home, I would relate to that as well. So, I think it depends a little bit on race because it's kind of easier for me to connect to someone that looks a bit like me, but (...) mostly on experiences I would say.” (Boaz, black male)

Despite not given the same nuanced response as Boaz, the other interviewees did imply a similar view of relatability. Alyssa, the black person that said **race does not matter** to her when watching a show, disclosed that she had a relatively hard time relating to the black characters in *Dear White People* (2017-) as her experiences as a black person did not correspond to the ones in the show. She explained that, since she was raised by her ethnically Dutch mother in a white Dutch environment, she feels more at home in native Dutch crowds than in those with a different background. Therefore, she cares more about elements like “Dutch culture” than race when watching a show. As such, she argued that she could relate more so to characters that share her upbringing and social surroundings than characters that share her skin colour. Such a worldview is not uncommon in persons of colour that are raised by white parents in a white environment (Twine, 1996). To a large extent, these points of identifying with experiences rather than a shared race were reaffirmed by other respondents as they clarified their initial comments on the topic. For instance, Coen gave a clear explanation of why he related more so to Gabe, the white heterosexual male character:

“I could relate with Gabe better than (...) other characters. (...) That's because his problems are more in line with (...) my problems. Because I, as a white male, don't have to (...) face discrimination (...) or all the other nasty things that come with being (...) either black, (...) gay, (...) or a woman. (...) Gabe didn't have those problems, but he had other problems.” (Coen, white male)

After inquiry, each respondent concluded something akin to what Coen and Ben said. Namely, that they could relate to characters that shared similar **experiences** and problems. In other words, if the interviewee has not experienced problems that are unique to, for example, being black, then he or she cannot identify with this character. However, if the character is black and is dealing with a universal problem, such as failing an exam, then race does not matter as the problem is not related to the character's blackness. This point was further reaffirmed, for instance, by Hoang. He remarked how he related to how Coco was trying to fit into a group of white people by changing her personality to make herself appear “white”. He noted that he, as an Asian, used to do the same thing. As such, it is evident that characters and storylines resonate with people from certain backgrounds more so than others. It depends on what the characters are going through; whether those experiences are universal; or whether they are uniquely experienced by particular social groups.

Regarding receptiveness to the show, all interviewees stated that their understanding and receptiveness of the show was shaped by who they are, i.e. their **identity**. Coen mentioned that him being a progressive person shaped his openness to the series and facilitated his understanding of the issues tackled in the show.

He noted that conservative narrow-minded people would reject its ideas about identity and blackness. Joanne made similar comments about her open-mindedness that helped her accept themes from the series. She revealed that the show made her reflect on her upbringing as an upper-middle-class privileged white person. Anjali and Hoang noted that, as minorities themselves, they could understand and relate to the issues more so than the average white person. Boaz also noted that being partially African American helped shape his understanding of the series. Alyssa made a similar remark, where she noted that her racial experience in the Netherlands as a black female also influenced her receptiveness to its ideas:

“If I had (...) different experiences in high school, (...) then my understanding of the series would (...) have been different.” (Alyssa, black female)

As such, each interviewee deems their identity as a critical element in their receptiveness and interpretation of the show. Whether that is being a white open-minded person or a black person with similar racial experiences, or as being part of a racial/ethnic minority that face similar issues. The significance of identity is also evident in the fact that the respondents primarily focused on people with a similar race or gender when discussing the series.

To conclude, all the interviewees could relate to the characters on some level. Whether that was shared racial experiences, or on a gender basis, or just relatable general experiences. The interviewees, knowingly or not, clearly connected more so with the characters that shared the most experiences with them (Bonam et al., 2019; McIntosh, 2018; Nelson et al., 2013; Sirin et al., 2016). Therefore, it is the experiences that mattered more so than the skin colour in accepting the storylines and relating to the characters. For instance, Alyssa could not relate to the black characters despite sharing the same racial background, whilst Hoang, despite being of Asian rather than of African descent, could relate based on similar minority experiences. As such, one's identity and the experiences that come with it are very relevant to understanding the themes of *Dear White People* (2017-) and in relating to the characters.

4.2.3. Informativeness, effectiveness, and value of the show

Past studies have documented that television can be a valuable source for informal learning in case the content is perceived as realistic (Bandura, 1977; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Merayo, 2011). The more realistic it is perceived, the more potential for social learning. In order to determine the strength of the series, the third and final theme covers informativeness of the series. Furthermore, the series message, its effectiveness, and its value in the Netherlands are examined.

Initially, the interviewees were inquired about their thoughts on what the **series' main message** is. The responses all fit into a similar range. Some noted that the main topic is showing that life is different for non-white people. Others noted that it is trying to start a conversation or raise awareness on social issues relating

to race and race relations. Finally, some noted that the main idea is showing how racism works on various levels and trying to show its adverse impacts on everybody.

“I think (...) that they want to show that if you're white, you have a different life in America as a (...) student at an Ivy League school than if you're (...) coloured. (...) Or women. Or (...) if you're not straight and if you have different sexual preferences, it... life becomes more difficult. And many people don't (...) notice because it's not (...) their world. So (...) I think the series tries to convey this message that (...) life is (...) different for people who are not the norm.” (Coen, white male)

The interviewees were also inquired about their thoughts on the series' **effectiveness** as a source of informal learning (Bandura, 1977). Joanne and Alyssa pointed out the fact that it might not reach a broad audience to make a big difference. Alyssa also wondered whether the series might only be watched by black people as the series message and title might be off-putting for white people. It might thus be effective in reaching its message to black people but not white people. Coen, Boaz and Anjali voiced similar concerns. As such, it seems that the interviewees think the series is mostly effective in educating or attracting people that are receptive to its ideas rather than attracting the people that, according to them, should be the ones viewing it.

As briefly mentioned, the participants noted on various occasions how **informative** the series was. The most recurring response was that they became more **aware and understanding** of societal issues outside of their own scope. Joanne gave the most elaborate answer to this as she noted how she learned about minority issues in the U.S., which made her reflect on minority issues in the Netherlands. This made her more receptive of their struggles:

“Of course, I already knew a little bit (...) [about] discrimination and violence against people with a different skin colour. Not only in America but just throughout the world. (...) But when you really read into it. (...) For me, it was a really new experience (...) to place myself within their position and see how they felt instead of (...) how I experienced the world. (...) [To see] their reasoning behind (...) the way they feel or the way they act. (...) It made me understand their point of view better. Cause first... sometimes (...) when you read something in the news (...) about (...) Muslims or (...) people who feel discriminated. (...) I'm like, ah, well, don't. (...) It's not such a big problem. Why (...) make such a big deal out of it. But (...) when you put yourself in someone else's shoes and really see how they (...) experience life (...) and how they are treated. For me, (...) [it] made me understand them better.” (Joanne, white female)

Racism was another issue that was discussed. Four out of six interviewees pointed out that they did not realise how much impact racism has on people and society. Therefore, they said the show taught them about the significance of the racism issue and made them understand the debate more so. Alyssa and Anjali, who are coloured minorities themselves, said that they did not realise the extent that racism can go as they have

not been exposed to racism as much in their own lives. They shared how their views changed after watching the show. Coen and Joanne disclosed similar things. On top of that, Joanne noted how **white privilege** was something she started to think about and explained how she started evaluating how her skin colour or race played a role in shaping her life. Additionally, she mentioned how she was lucky to be born as a pretty middle-class white girl in the Netherlands. The interviewees also mentioned that the **discord** between black and white viewers is particularly striking to them:

“That's what I learned. Like people view it very differently. Like black people view the show very differently and the topics very differently than (...) the white community.” (Boaz, black male)

Regarding the topic of **realism**, all the interviewees declared the show to be very authentic, especially regarding the experiences of the characters. They noted that matters such as racism, sexism, or homophobia are universal. In that regard, the series authentically portrays these issues and the impact they can have.

“Yeah, for sure. You have the (...) right-wing extremists who played a big part in the season two [sic]. (...) We also see that here in the Netherlands. That's a pretty common thing, and it gets only bigger. Um, also for people who are gay who struggle with... That's also universal. And, uh, discrimination. That's also pretty universal.” (Coen, white male)

Some, however, mentioned that they are unsure of the authenticity of some other elements of the show. Three participants declared that, as the show takes place in the U.S., they are unable to judge with certainty how credible it is. Two persons, for instance, pointed out that the show focuses on university experiences of black Americans. As such, it might not entirely reflect and capture black people's experiences in, for instance, the Netherlands.

Conversation then turned to the **need for similar shows**. Every single interviewee specified the importance of representation. They argued that to create more understanding for one another, it is important to show different perspectives to life. Some interviewees mentioned that, despite not identifying with the characters, it helped them see the world from a different point of view. More specifically, it was noted that shows like *Dear White People* (2017-) can help educate people on societal issues such as racism. Others highlighted the importance of proper **minority representation**. Both to improve the minority's image to the majority and to also improve their self-image:

“I think (...) it's important for people to be represented. To show other people that you are capable of the same things, that we are the same kind of person with the same capabilities and (...) hopefully (...) options and chances one day, which we are not [getting]. Because people have (...) prejudice. And I think once you can show that you are the same, [they] go away. And as soon as you don't have [them], (...) you won't act racist or discriminate people. (...) So, I think that [representation] is important to make this world a better place and to get people to make the most out of themselves, their talents and capacities, their own self-image, confidence.” (Anjali, other minority female)

Finally, the **value of the show within the Netherlands** was discussed. All the participants noted that the show holds some value. For instance, they noted that implicit or subtle racism is still a thing in the Netherlands and that people could learn how it works by watching the show (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Mills, 2007). The more common answer was that Dutch viewers could translate the content to the Netherlands with an emphasis on problematised Dutch minorities such as the Moroccan community (De Koning, 2016). Therefore, the participants noted that, despite the American nature of the show, viewers in the Netherlands could learn about socially relevant topics such as racism. As such, providing support for the idea that the show is an excellent tool for social learning.

To summarise, the interviewees had a lot of different takeaways from the show. Even though the specific setting is not representative of the whole world, the specific experiences do go across borders and represent experiences that also hold value in the Netherlands. As for representation, it is important as it helps create more understanding of one another by showcasing different perspectives. As such, the interviewees thought that the series can be a great source of informal learning.

Finally, in the case of these topics, the background of the participants did not seem to have a considerable influence on their responses. All of the participants were receptive of the show and its themes. Some noted how they did not learn that much more, whilst others noted that they did. The differences were mostly attributed to their experiences, or lack thereof, in real life with discrimination and racism. To conclude, the participants were mostly positive about the show, its content, and its worth as a tool for social learning.

5. Conclusion

African Americans have had a difficult relationship with American mass media ever since its inception (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a; Hunt et al., 2019). Since the introduction of television series, black people have been underrepresented, misrepresented, and relegated to supporting roles (Brown, 2016; Campbell, 2016a; Hunt et al., 2019). As such, the recent Netflix series *Dear White People* (2017-) presents a visible deviation from that norm. The series boasts a majority black cast and tackles various racial issues head-on (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018; Wilson, 2019). In doing so, it presents both the joy and the pain that come with black life in America. Given its universal themes, the show resonates with black and other minority viewers across the (Western) world (Topel, 2019). Given its unprecedented and singular nature, it has attracted many reactions ranging from strong acclaim to vicious hatred. In order to understand these reactions, this study examined how people in the Netherlands, a multicultural country with a significant black and other minority populace, make sense of the show's messages. Therefore, the research question was: *How do audiences respond to and interpret the representation of black identity in the series Dear White People (2017-)?*

To answer this research question, it was essential to explore three theoretical pillars: race and its effect on identity; representation of blackness on entertainment television; and meaning-making processes of audiences. These foundations helped contextualise the responses. Therefore, building on these theoretical understandings, a thematic content analysis was conducted to study black, white, and other minority audiences' responses and interpretations of black representation in the series *Dear White People* (2017-). The analysed dataset, consisting of transcriptions of three focus groups and six semi-structured in-depth interviews, was subjected to a rigorous coding process. The combination of these data collection methods led to more exhaustive results that complement one another and help answer the question in a detailed and fruitful way. As such, this process resulted in six themes split across the two data collection methods. These six themes are combined here to form some general conclusion subdivided into the following four themes.

The first theme focuses on the representation of black people in entertainment media and in the series *Dear White People* (2017-). It provides conclusions and insights into what people from various racial/ethnic backgrounds know and feel about representation. The second theme explores how the various audiences are making sense of *Dear White People* (2017-). Conclusions are drawn about the responses and interpretations to the series from the white, black, and other minority persons in this study. The third theme, relatability and the roles of race, provides insights on who relates to what and what role someone's racial/ethnic background plays in this process. The fourth and final theme explores the differences between the interview and focus group results, i.e. people that have seen the show and ones that have only seen clips from it during the focus groups. Together, all these themes help form an answer to the research question as discussed in the next section.

5.1. Answer to the research question

The representation of black people was a recurring theme in both the focus groups and interviews. The focus, however, differed slightly. The focus groups covered black representation in entertainment media, whereas the interviews specifically focused on black representation in the series *Dear White People* (2017-). Together, the findings form a picture of how white, black, and other minority people think about black representation and representation in general. Based on the responses, it is evident that representation matters a lot to the black and other minority persons as the vast majority of them seek out non-white content that represents them. The white persons, however, did not display a desire for racial representation. That difference can be explained by the fact that white people are used to seeing themselves represented everywhere (Baynes, 2003; Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Campbell, 2016a; Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Fujioka, 2005, Guess, 2006; Hunt et al., 2019; Mastro, 2009, 2017; Mastro & Greenberg; 2000). On top of that, the white persons displayed less knowledge on topics like representation and racism. This finding helps contextualise the responses and interpretations that are discussed hereafter as, naturally, less knowledge and awareness of such specific issues seems to lead to less of an appreciation of a show that is focused on addressing those topics.

Focusing on the show, the majority of the responses towards black representation in *Dear White People* (2017-) were positive. The tone, characters, and storylines were all praised in some form. Multiple people remarked how they attained knowledge about various matters from the show. The series taught them more about social issues (e.g. discrimination, microaggressions, police brutality), the impact of racism, and problems with representation. Black people mostly hailed the fact that someone finally made a show that speaks about issues that matter to them (e.g. microaggressions, feelings of othering, silencing black voices). Other minorities related to most of the same issues and, therefore, responded equally positive. White people responded positively but were also clearly the ones that learned the most from the show. That is attributable to the fact that the show tackles social problems, mainly pertaining to black and other minorities, which white people have, in general, lesser awareness of. For example, white people in the West are less likely to experience the kind of othering and marginalisation that communities of colour experience (Cabrera, 2014; Hammon, 2013; Norton & Sommers, 2011). Overall, the viewers were receptive and positive towards the show.

In terms of interpretations of the show, there were more differences between the persons. Meaning-making processes differed between white, black, and other minority people. The majority of black and other minority people interpreted the show in the preferred way (Hall, 2012). They recognised the themes and issues that the show addresses. Once again, this is because they recognise these issues from their own experiences as a black or other minority person. White people, however, were split on this. A portion of white persons interpreted the show in the intended way by displaying awareness of race-related issues (Hall, 2012). Another portion presented different interpretations that partially contradicted the intended message from the show. These different interpretations are, however, unsurprising. People use their own experiences and

knowledge to make sense of what they are seeing. Therefore, the first reaction upon seeing a different perspective is to try and make sense of it through one's own experiences. As white people are unlikely to be on the receiving end of (anti-black) discrimination, they are less likely to be understanding towards victims of it. As such, contradictory statements are to be expected.

Another factor that influenced interpretations was relatability. The black persons identified a lot with the black characters. The other minority persons also related to what the black characters were going through (e.g. marginalisation, microaggressions, othering). Although black minority experiences do not wholly correspond with other minorities' experiences, there is some clear overlap that leads to other minority persons identifying with them. As for the white persons, they identified with the white characters from the show.

Upon taking a closer look it is evident that all of them resonated with characters that have shared experiences rather than shared backgrounds: some white females resonated with the black female characters in the show due to overlapping experiences; some black persons could not relate to the black characters as they have not experienced similar things; and some other minority persons related to some black issues whilst simultaneously not understanding some other black specific issues. As such, it is a combination of personal experiences and knowledge of social issues that determine someone's interpretation of and relatability with the show.

Finally, there are differences between the focus group and interview results. Or better yet, between people that have seen the show and people that have not seen the show. The focus group participants featured ten people out of fifteen that had not seen the show and, thus, were responding to clips with no prior knowledge. As such, they occasionally missed the time and investment in the show to fully comprehend the issues that tackled in it. That was visible in the wider variety of interpretations, including some that completely missed the point of a scene. As such, it provided insights into how clips of scenes without context can lead to completely different interpretations than the intended one. This, perhaps, mirrored the discrepancy seen in real life: the show is beloved by many viewers, critically acclaimed, and airing its fourth season later this year. Simultaneously, the show is getting hated on and review bombed on the internet by people who have, most likely, not watched it or just seen scenes out of context. Context is, therefore, key. Further support for this is provided by the interviewees as, having all seen the show, their responses were very positive. They all displayed a lot of knowledge on the topics that the show is tackling. As such, the disparity between these people helps explain the wide-ranging responses that the show has gotten. The combination of people that have seen the show and have not seen the show has, thus, led to complementary and elaborate results.

5.2. Theoretical implications

This study aimed to study how various audiences in the Netherlands make sense of the series *Dear White People* (2017-). In this shape, the current research touches on several disciplines and themes. New insights are documented based on the three theoretical pillars that were explored in this study. The three pillars were: race and its effect on identity; representation of blackness on entertainment television; and meaning-making processes of audiences. This research documents that white Dutch persons in this study identify more so with white characters and that black Dutch persons identify more so with black characters even though the American racial context is quite different from the Dutch one. As such, the findings imply that shared racial identity might be a more critical relatability factor than, for instance, shared nationality. Furthermore, the desire for minority representation is very much present for the black and other minority persons in this research. This implies that racial (and ethnic) identity manifests itself in very conscious ways within Dutch minorities.

The findings of this study also provide further support for the Marley hypothesis, which posits that awareness and understanding of modern racism are affected by one's knowledge, or lack thereof, of racial history (Bonam et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). The persons in this study that displayed much understanding are the ones that had an awareness of historical contexts of race and discrimination. Furthermore, the results also provide further support for the Group Empathy Theory, which posits that marginalised groups of society are more likely to empathise, understand, and support other marginalised groups (Sirin et al., 2016). By being very understanding and supportive of the black characters in the show, the other minority persons in this study illustrated behaviour that is in line with theory. Finally, results also indicate the strong desire of black and other minority persons for proper representation (De Koning, 2016; Fujioka, 2005; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). It is clear that negative representation has affected several persons through decreased self-esteem, negative social racial experiences, and through the negative perception of their racial/ethnic/religious identity.

The studied persons remarked how subversive, stereotype disconfirming, and representative the show was regarding black people and the real world. Multiple interviewees noted how the show opened their eyes on problematic depictions in mainstream media. As previously documented by Ramasubramanian (2007, 2010, 2011b, 2015) and others (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007; Scharer & Ramasubramanian, 2015) in a news media setting, a combination of media literacy training and stereotype-disconfirming messages can help change people's views. The responses of the interviewees could be an indication that this approach also works in an entertainment TV setting as *Dear White People* (2017-) engages in both (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018).

To conclude, the findings prove this study to be a scientifically relevant addition to an extensive and interdisciplinary body of literature. Moreover, it is, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the first study that explores the series *Dear White People* (2017-) in the Netherlands. As such, this paper also provides new insights into meaning-making processes of various audience members in the Netherlands. It displays how

responses to and interpretations of media texts (can) differ along racial/ethnic lines. Simultaneously, the findings highlight how one's position as a minority or majority member of society affects one's thought patterns. The research also showcases how racial tensions can be addressed and how interracial understanding can be effectively built through media texts. On top of that, this study highlights the fact that minorities in the Netherlands experience similar feelings of exclusion and discrimination as their American counterparts. The findings also display how some minority persons find solace in series such as *Dear White People* (2017-). In essence, the show, and shows like it, work as a comforting shoulder for individuals that are experiencing feelings of isolation due to their racial difference to the majority populace. The show, thus, works as a support system or as a coping mechanism for individuals experiencing discrimination or interracial misunderstandings in real life.

5.3. Social implications

This research provides socially relevant insights into meaning-making processes of various Dutch audience members concerning the series *Dear White People* (2017-). The results indicate that the series is successful in educating people about racial issues, presenting a wide range of representative blackness, and providing a support system for minority persons. It seems as though Netflix and the show's creators have put together a product that strongly resonates with particular audience members beyond the United States. As such, this show neatly fits into Netflix's brand strategy of creating diverse and inclusive content that foregoes centring around a traditional white heterosexual male lead (Jenner, 2018). The results also indicate that there is a strong need for more shows like it. As the interviewees pointed out, the show tackles important and disputed topics that need to be addressed (e.g. equality, marginalisation, multiculturalism), whilst finally representing complex black identities with all their (im)perfections. A show focusing on problematised Dutch minorities and their experiences would, for instance, be a socially relevant and desired show. As such, it would be a smart endeavour for television screenwriters and producers to study various underrepresented minorities across the world to uncover more wanted needs. Doing so will, most likely, result in a profitable and original product. These findings also indicate that Netflix's brand strategy of representation is an effective approach to successful content creation (Jenner, 2018).

Moreover, the study unveils that improper or negative representation on American television affects minorities in the Netherlands. Several black persons remarked how they suffer from biases and prejudices in real life based on how American media portrays black persons. Simultaneously, some white persons engaged in those same biases and prejudices that derive from American representation. As such, the findings illustrate the importance of proper representation for not just Americans, but also Dutch persons, given its broad effects.

5.4. Limitations

Despite the aim to maximise the relevance of this study, there are still some limitations that need to be addressed. One such limitation is the utilised sampling methods. The participants had to sign up for the focus groups themselves. Given the fact that there was no monetary reward, the study mostly attracted people that were interested in the topic. As such, most participants were rather open-minded and receptive towards the discussion and the series. This, however, is not completely reflective of the world at large. Especially given the fact that the show's announcement trailer got such a severe backlash (BaVaro, 2018; Jones, 2018; Obell, 2017; Ugwu, 2018). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the utilised sampling methods did not help attract people that are completely opposed to the show and the themes tackled within it. As such, the opinions of such people are not reflected within this study. A way to resolve this could have been to explicitly mention that the study is looking for people that completely disagree with or hate this study's topic.

It was the aim of this study to obtain more understanding of meaning-making processes of various people in relation to *Dear White People* (2017-). As such, this study has achieved its purpose. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the people in the sample are well off, are pursuing a high level of education, and are living in the most diverse city in the Netherlands. This study would most likely lead to different results if one changed even one of the mentioned factors. As such, this study presents a snapshot of opinions and thoughts of a small portion of the population at one single moment in time.

Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the researcher's connection to the topic following the principle of reflexivity (Brennen, 2017; Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). The topic of this study was especially relevant and personal due to the researcher's minority background. For that reason, repeated efforts were made to ensure objectivity by constantly referring to literature in argumentations. During the focus groups and interviews, it was especially important to display distance between the material and the study to attain substantive responses. This went well. Occasionally, however, responses slipped through such as this instance when a black guy told a story where he noted how he got treated differently because of his skin colour:

“That is really stupid.” (Magomed, other minority male)

However, the researcher's minority background also helped in getting honest and unfiltered answers to the questions. This was because the black people and the other minority people recognised the researcher as “one of their own” due to said minority background. Assumptions were made that therefore the researcher would be understanding of the comments they made (Bucholtz, 2011). Simultaneously, despite being part of a problematised minority and having a foreign-sounding name, the researcher has a white skin colour and was raised in a middle-class native Dutch environment. This helped win equal favour with the white respondents as, judging by some of the remarks, they saw the researcher as “one of their own” as well. Similarly to what Bucholtz (2011) experienced as a white professor in her study on gendered race talk among white Californian youth, the researcher became complicit in the race talk that arose during the focus groups and interviews given that no attempts were made to correct or point out problems with the participants' and interviewees'

views and vocabulary. As such, the white persons felt comfortable expressing thoughts that, with a non-white researcher's presence, would most likely not have been expressed as comfortably. Thus, there were clear benefits to the researcher's background and personal commitment to the topic as well as some obstacles.

5.5. Future research

This study would most definitely lead to different results if one replicated it on another educational level, or people from another class, or people that are younger or older, or that live in a less diverse city. As such, it would be fascinating to explore how audiences from other groups make sense of the show. Furthermore, this study did not explicitly differentiate between light-skinned and dark-skinned black people. Although it was not the aim to explicitly explore differences between these groups, discords were already observed in this study. Therefore, performing focus groups/interviews with a variety of black people would lead to more fruitful results. A closer look would be provided into how differences in black skin colour affect one's experiences and, in turn, one's opinions.

Another important facet to explore in more detail is how American media affects Dutch people. Some participants, unconsciously, displayed American biases and views in regards to race. Views that are commonplace in American society and media, but not in the Netherlands. As such, it is of relevance to further explore the effects that viewing American media can have on Dutch people. More specifically: how does American media's representation of their black and other minorities affect Dutch people's views of minorities in the Netherlands?

Finally, this study documents that *Dear White People* (2017-) seems to be a positive addition to the lives of the minority persons in this study. The minorities feel seen, heard, represented, and, as such, the show seems to positively influence their self-esteem. Future research should delve into these promising findings and further explore the potential that *Dear White People* (2017-), and series like it, have on boosting self-esteem in minorities. Such a study can be performed using quantitative research methods like questionnaires to gather results from the largest group possible. These findings can then be used during the decision-making processes when creating new media content.

Despite the limitations, this research has provided useful additions to literature on representation and meaning-making. As media is a much-contested site for racial, gender, and sexual identities, it seems from this study's findings that shows like *Dear White People* (2017-) can help reimagine what those identities comprise. This research also points at possible positive effects of representation on society. Simultaneously, the results indicate that the negative effects of mis- and underrepresentation of minorities in American media also affects minorities in the Netherlands. To conclude, this study provides new insights that can be explored in future studies on topics of representation, belonging, and meaning-making. It also highlights the potential that lies in creating diverse and inclusive content and, as such, provides support for Netflix's current brand strategy.

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Appendix A: topic list – focus groups

1 – GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What is your name?
2. What is your favourite scripted TV show? (Friends, Black Mirror, Orange is the New Black, Money Heist...)
3. What type of TV content do you watch the most? (reality shows, serialised TV fiction, documentaries...)

2 – VIEWING BEHAVIOUR OF SCRIPTED TELEVISION

4. What kind of series do you watch? What genre and what kind of topics? Could you name examples?
 - a. Why do you watch those series? (educational purposes; pass time; entertainment...)
 - b. Are there examples of series you do not like? Why?
5. How do you decide what series to watch? (recommendations by friends/partner, reviews, advertising...)
6. Are you interested in shows that tackle/showcase social issues? For example, cultural or sexuality issues?

3 – ATTITUDES TOWARDS RACE ON SCRIPTED TELEVISION

Let's talk about television characters.

7. What type of characters are your favourite? (good cop, bad guy, ambiguous, funny...)
8. Have you ever identified yourself with a character? With identification, I mean a potential bond, connection, or relatedness that you felt with a character from a show. It could be based on similarities with the character and yourself or that you could place yourself into the character's journey. Please justify your answer.
9. How does race play a role in this? Is it easier to identify with (lead) characters of the same racial/ethnic/cultural background? Why (not)?

Group activity with cards and characteristics.

10. Before we start with the activity, I would like you to think of the last series that you watched with a black lead. Please write it down.
 - a. Which series did you write down?
 - b. Was it hard to come up with one? Why do you think that is the case? What is the last series you watched with a black lead?
 - c. If never: why do you think that is?

*Please think of a white actor/actress. Please think of 5 characteristics that describe the type of characters he/she plays.
Please think of a black actor/actress. Please think of 5 characteristics that describe the type of characters he/she plays.*

11. Did you notice any differences between what you wrote down?
 - a. If yes, what differences did you notice? If no, why do you think that is?
 - b. Why do you think there are differences between them?

4 – MEANINGS GIVEN TO DEAR WHITE PEOPLE

Dear White People is a satirical comedy-drama that explores race relations in the U.S. on a university level. Every episode follows a different student and presents their experiences at this university.

12. Show clip that sets up the show. (s01e01 → 00:00 – 02:30) – 2.30 min
 - a. What do you think of this scene?
 - b. What do you think of the tone of the scene?
13. Show clip of the party. (s01e05 → 18:20 – 20:20) – 2.00 min
 - a. What do you think about what is going on in the scene?
 - b. What is your interpretation of this scene?
 - c. Does this relate to any real-life experiences you have had in any way?
14. Show clip of the aftermath. (s01e05 → 21:20 – 23:30) – 2.10 min
 - a. What do you think about what is going on in the scene?
 - b. How does this relate to the previous clip you have seen?
 - c. What message do you think this scene is trying to convey (interpretation)?
15. Show clip of Reggie talking to Gabe. (s02e02 → 27:00 – 28:20) – 1.20 min
 - a. What do you think about what is going on in the scene?
 - b. What message do you think this scene is trying to convey (interpretation)?
 - c. Do you feel like you can relate to his experience?
16. Show clip of Dear Right People. (s02e01 → 27:05 – 28:10) – 1.05 min
 - a. What do you think about what is going on in the scene?
 - b. What message do you think this scene is trying to convey (interpretation)?
 - c. Do you feel like you can relate what they are saying in any way?
17. Show clip of Alt Ivy trolling Sam. (s02e01 → 28:30 – 29:45) – 1.15 min
 - a. What do you think about what is going on in the scene?
 - b. What message do you think this scene is trying to convey (interpretation)?
 - c. How does this relate to the previous clip you have seen?
 - d. Do you feel like you can relate to her experience in any way?

5 – CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

18. How do you feel about the show now that you have seen these clips?
19. There was a vicious online reaction when the trailer of the show first aired from a certain corner of the political spectrum. These people called this show racist against white people due to the title.
 - a. What do you think of this reaction?
 - b. How do you feel about it yourself?
20. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me.
 - c. Is there anything else concerning the topics that you would like to share?
 - d. Any concluding remarks?

Appendix B: topic list – interviews

1 – GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What is your name?
2. What is your favourite scripted TV show?
3. Have you watched one or two seasons of Dear White People?
4. Have you watched the show with friends, family or on your own? Why?

2 – QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SERIES

5. What was your main motivation to watch Dear White People?
6. Do you actively look for (and consume shows) similar to Dear White People? Why?

Storylines

5. What do you think are the main topics of Dear White People?
6. What do you think the series is trying to communicate/achieve if anything?
 - a. Do you think the series is effective at that?
7. Could you name any scenes that were particularly meaningful to you? Justify your answer.
8. Do you think the series does a good job at portraying real life?
9. What have you learnt from the series, if anything?
 - a. If not, why do you think you did not?
10. How would you say that your background affects the way you interpret Dear White People, if so?

Characters

11. What do you think about the representation of black people in Dear White People?
 - a. What would you say are the main similarities with the representations of black people in other shows you have watched?
 - b. What would you say are the main differences with the representations of black people in other shows you have watched?
 - c. Should something be improved in terms of the representation of black people?
12. What do you think of how the characters are constructed in Dear White People? (e.g. in terms of clothing, behaviours, etc.) Any stereotypes?
13. Is there anything you did not like about the show or that you think should have been better done?

Identification

14. Would you say you identified with any of the characters or situations from Dear White People? (e.g. knowing what the character was going through)

15. Would you say it is easier to identify with a character from a similar race? Why?

3 – QUESTIONS ABOUT THE REACTIONS

16. What expectations did you have of the series before watching it, if any?

a. Where did those expectations come from?

b. Would you say that it confirmed or subverted those expectations?

17. What do you think of the show's title?

18. There was a vicious online reaction when the trailer of the show first aired from certain, predominantly white, people. These people called this show racist against white people due to the title. What do you think of this reaction?

19. Would you say there is a need for these types of shows? Why?

20. The series takes place in the United States and not The Netherlands. Do you think the series still holds value in the Netherlands?

21. Is there anything else you would like to discuss or share?

Appendix C: sample descriptions

FOCUS GROUPS								
Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Background	Category	Date of focus group	# ¹³	Seen show?
Odette	21	Female	Dutch & French	Dutch & French	White	09-05-19	1	No
Celine	22	Female	French	French	White	09-05-19	1	No
Chiara	24	Female	Dutch	Afro-Surinamese	Black	09-05-19	1	No
Sabine	20	Female	Dutch	Dutch & Chinese	Other	09-05-19	1	Yes
Ela	24	Female	Dutch & Turkish	Turkish	Other	09-05-19	1	No
Maarten	25	Male	Dutch	Dutch	White	10-05-19	2	No
Coen	24	Male	Dutch	Dutch	White	10-05-19	2	Yes
Robin	24	Female	Dutch	Dutch	White	10-05-19	2	Yes
Emma	23	Female	Dutch	Dutch	White	10-05-19	2	No
Daphne	21	Female	Dutch	Dutch	White	10-05-19	2	No
Ngoni	22	Male	Zimbabwean	Zimbabwean	Black	10-05-19	3	No
Boaz	22	Male	Dutch & American	Dutch & African American	Black	10-05-19	3	Yes
Memphis	23	Male	Dutch	Dutch & Afro-Surinamese	Black	10-05-19	3	No
Menno	24	Male	Dutch	Dutch & Kenyan	Black	10-05-19	3	No
Zara	23	Female	Dutch	Afro-Surinamese	Black	10-05-19	3	Yes

¹³ Refers to specific focus group: 1 = mixed focus group, 2 = white focus group, 3 = black focus group

INTERVIEWS							
Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Background	Category	Date of interview	Focus group ¹⁴
Coen	24	Male	Dutch	Dutch	White	18-05-2019	Yes
Joanne	23	Female	Dutch	Dutch	White	19-05-2019	No
Alyssa	23	Female	Dutch	Dutch & Afro-Surinamese	Black	20-05-2019	No
Anjali	20	Female	Dutch	Indo-Surinamese	Other	22-05-2019	No
Boaz	22	Male	Dutch & American	Dutch & African American	Black	23-05-2019	Yes
Hoang	25	Male	Dutch	Vietnamese	Other	04-07-2019	No

¹⁴ Refers to whether the interviewee also participated in the focus groups.

Appendix D: description of clips

#	Episode	Timestamp	Description
1	s01e01	00:00 – 02:30	The show is introduced via a quirky voiceover. The narrator explains the setting of the show, namely Winchester University. The show's main lead Sam, a mixed-race female, is also introduced. The clip then displays a lot of racially tinted situations in a comedic way. This leads to the conclusion of the clip where Sam speaks up about her experiences on her campus radio show titled “Dear White People”.
2	s01e05	18:20 – 20:20	The clip starts with a party. A white guy raps the n-word. Reggie, a black male, asks him not to use that word. The white guy does not understand why he cannot say it. An argument unfolds and others get involved.
3	s01e05	21:20 – 23:30	This is a continuation of the previous scene. A fight evolves between Reggie and the white guy. Campus security shows up and pulls them apart. They look at Reggie and ask him whether he is a student and ask him for his ID. Reggie refuses to show it as the same is not demanded of the white guy. One of the security guards then pulls a gun on Reggie. He then hands his ID over. The party ends with people leaving in shock and disbelief. Reggie is seen walking home completely traumatised.
4	s02e02	27:00 – 28:20	The scene portrays an interview with Reggie. He is asked about his experiences as a black male. He describes how he is perceived as a threat by white people. People behave differently around him and he describes how that has affected him. He concludes by stating that he is done with seeing himself through other people's eyes.
5	s02e01	27:05 – 28:10	The scene starts with Sam and her friend listening to a reactionary podcast titled “Dear Right People”. The three people are belittling the left and arguing that white people are the victims of oppression rather than people of colour, the LGBTQ+ community, and other minorities. The scene finishes with them proclaiming that AltIvyW, an alt-right social media troll, is a campus hero for sticking it to Sam.
6	s02e01	28:30 – 29:45	The scene shows Sam reading a tweet from AltIvyW that contains a picture of Sam and her parents with the text “Too bad your father ruined you by fucking a monkey. Bet she’s angry all the time too.”. Sam is then shown crying while her friend tries to console her.