

**Reclaiming the Narrative: Native American Representation, Images, and
Storytelling in Contemporary Film and Media**

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Reclaiming the Narrative: Native American Representation, Images, and Storytelling in
Contemporary Film and Media

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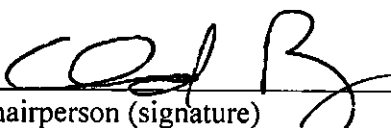
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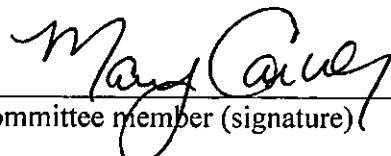
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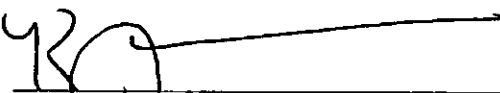
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Abstract

Historically, Native American characters and stories have been fraught with stereotypes and misrepresentation. Previous research has demonstrated Native Americans remain significantly underrepresented in mainstream media and are frequently portrayed through historical or clichéd narratives that fail to reflect the complexity of contemporary Native American life. Scholarship on media sovereignty has emphasized the importance of Native American participation in storytelling and visual production. As the number of Indigenous and Native American projects reaching mainstream media has peaked in recent years, questions remain regarding how audiences perceive these portrayals and how Native American media professionals navigate the entertainment industry.

In this mixed-method study, the researcher employed a qualitative research design informed by Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs). The study conducted semi-structured interviews with nine Native Americans with experience in the entertainment industry. In addition, survey research examined audience attitudes toward Native American representation, authenticity, realism, stereotyping, and Native involvement in writing and directing. Interview participants stressed the importance of expanding Native representation beyond conventional narratives, advocating for more contemporary and nuanced portrayals that more accurately reflect the complexity of the Native American experience. Overall, these findings provided an important foundation for understanding how Native American media professionals navigate the industry as well as how audiences react to it. The survey findings similarly emphasized the importance of creative agency in Native American projects. Audiences generally perceived Native American representation as improving. However, respondents reported concerns regarding

stereotypes, lack of complexity, and limited contemporary representation. Interview and survey findings suggest meaningful representation extends beyond visibility alone and requires Native involvement in writing and directing Native American stories.

This study contributes to existing scholarship regarding media sovereignty by combining the lived experiences of Native American media professionals with audience perspectives. However, the study is limited by its reliance on online survey recruitment and a non-random sample, which may not fully represent broader audience populations. Similarly, the limited number of interviews does not represent the diversity of all Native American tribes, each of which are distinct. Future research should continue documenting Native American experiences in the entertainment industry. In addition, research should continue examining Native American films, television shows, and streaming content in conjunction with audience reception.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge the filmmakers, storytellers, activists, and creatives working to transform the world with their art. Never forget the power of your work. The stories you tell today can influence how future generations understand themselves and one another tomorrow. Thank you for telling the stories that often go unheard, challenging assumptions, and contributing to a more just and equitable future for us all.

Introduction

In 1792, then Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson designed a medal to be given to foreign diplomats (Prucha, 1976). This medal featured an Indigenous woman adorned with a featured headdress to represent the fledgling country (Prucha, 1976). Indeed, the oldest symbol of the United States is a Native American. Since then, Native Americans have been repeatedly used as symbolic figures of nationhood, culture, and commerce. Native American imagery appears on municipal seals, such as those of New York City and Los Angeles County. Their culture has been used to name military technologies, including the Tomahawk missile and Apache helicopter. The Native American image has also been commodified to sell many consumer goods—everything from baking powder, bullets, butter, and recreational vehicles. Some of the most notable iconography belongs to American sports. Images like the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo, characterized by exaggerated features and a fixed grin, sparked controversy. It remained the team's mascot from 1940 until 2019. For many Americans, these images represent their primary point of reference for Native American identity.

The pattern points all the way back to a singular shared idea that appeared during the founding of the United States: "Out of the thirty-year span between 1860–1890... the culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed" (Brown, 2017, p. 11). During the late nineteenth century, virtually all great myths of the American West emerged (Brown, 2017). Among the many stories of American mythos including fur traders, prospectors, gamblers, gunmen, cowboys, and others, there was rarely the voice of a Native American (Brown, 2017). When a story did involve a Native American, it was often not penned by someone non-Native (Brown, 2017). The mythology of the

American frontier presented Western expansion as a defining force in shaping American identity. This mythology often wrote Native Americans as obstacles of progress and civilization. These early stories established a narrative structure that continues to affect portrayals of Native Americans today.

The myths of the American West did not sustain themselves on their own. Their persistence is tied to the rise of mass media, which widely distributed these narratives, exposing them repeatedly across generations (Hall, 2012). The media has always been a powerful driver of mass communication, as it can simultaneously be used to make certain ideas known to a mass audience (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Communication scholars define media as systems of symbolic production and transmission that enable shared meaning across large audiences (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Through channels such as film, television, streaming platforms and other digital media, media organizations and individual users distribute messages that repeat information and ideas about society across a wide and varied audience, thereby influencing collective understandings of reality (Littlejohn et al., 2021). When mainstream media circulates ideas about race and identity, they reflect and actively construct social attitudes (Yosso, 2002). For this study, media refers broadly to on-screen narratives, including film, broadcast television, streaming platforms, and video-on-demand (VOD) services. These communication channels are grouped together as media because of their shared purpose, which is to reach mass audiences. Though their methods of distribution may differ, they all influence public understanding of racial identity.

The naturalization of racial perceptions must be understood within the broader framework of cultural hegemony. Hall (2021) argues that dominant ideologies become

naturalized through repetition, appearing as common sense rather than historic and symbolic constructions. Within a North American colonial context, these ideologies have historically represented Native Americans as primitive, vanishing, or people of the past. Trouillot reminds us that power operates not only through what is said, but through what is not: “the production of traces is always also the creation of silences” (2015, p. 29). Mass media has long silenced the Native American voice, and the issue persists in every major professional role in the entertainment industry.

Native Americans have historically remained underrepresented among Hollywood actors, writers, and directors. This is despite Native American communities nearly doubling in size from 2010 to 2020 according to the most recent U.S. Census (Jones et al., 2021). In the 2019-2020 TV season, Native Americans accounted for less than 1% of roles (Giaccardi et al., 2024). In 2024, UCLA’s Hollywood Diversity Report found no Native American lead characters, writers, or directors among the year’s top theatrical films (Ramón et al., 2025). This lack of representation is evident in every stage of production, including screenwriting. Native American, Indigenous, and First Nations writers account for less than one percent of employed screenwriters (WGAW, 2025). Overall, Native Americans are virtually absent from the writers’ room to set. Together, these findings suggest that Native American misrepresentation in media is not merely a problem of visibility, but one of creative control. From above to below the line, Native American perspectives remain largely excluded from the creative processes that determine the portrayal of their culture and stories.

Native Americans are not only underrepresented in media but misrepresented as well. Historically, western films have warped the general public’s understanding of

Native American identity (Rollins and O'Connor, 2003). Early Hollywood westerns depicted Native Americans as either violent obstacles to civilization or noble relics of the past, doomed to fail in the face of modernity (Rollins and O'Connor, 2003). This has resulted in the proliferation of harmful stereotypes that misrepresent the Native American experience. These stereotypes have harmful effects, leading to ignorance on the part of audiences who do not have richer references for authentic representation. They also perpetuate Native American experiences as having existed exclusively in the past. Additionally, research demonstrates that stereotypical representations negatively affect the self-esteem, academic aspirations, and personal identities of Native Americans (Fryberg et al., 2008; Leavitt et al., 2015).

If mainstream media is the primary engine behind these ideas, then media sovereignty appears as a form of intervention. Recent research suggests productions with more Native American talent and crew, such as *Reservation Dogs* (2021–2023), are associated with stronger audience reception and increased policy awareness (Giaccardi et al., 2024). Resisting past misrepresentation is possible through self-representation or reclaiming Native American narratives and images on screen. Indigenous scholars describe these efforts of self-representation as narrative and visual sovereignty. Today, the propagation of contemporary Indigenous television programs and streaming content suggest a shift toward self-representation. While the proliferation of Native media continues to grow, this research asks: How do audiences perceive Native American representation in media? Additionally, how do Native Americans working in the entertainment industry interpret this representation? To answer these questions, this study

combines qualitative interviews from Native American media professionals with survey research of general audiences.

To answer the problem of underrepresentation, this research first considers audience attitude toward Native American representation. Additionally, this research provides perspectives from Native Americans working in the entertainment industry. While past research has extensively documented stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in film and television, less attention has been given to how contemporary audiences interpret newer forms of Native American representation. Even less have studied how Native media professionals interpret the relationship between representation and authenticity. Along with this data, this research will also provide a critical reflection on, and some key examples of, Native American misrepresentation. The purpose of this thesis is to discuss why self-representation is so important, because it operates as forms of activism in the wake of historical misrepresentation. The aim of this thesis is to discuss the reasons why such activism is necessary, as well as consider its strength and challenges.

The following study is bolstered by various media phenomena and Indigenous media theories. The latter includes several Western stereotypes detailed in the literature review. Visual and narrative sovereignty are also defined as important instruments of self-representation. The literature review considers how Native Americans connect the idea of visual and narrative sovereignty with the emergence and development of Indigenous media, which has resulted in the reappropriation of Indigenous images and narratives. Additionally, this study considers how this reappropriation may benefit political sovereignty. By situating contemporary underrepresentation within broader

histories of misrepresentation and erasure, this research examines the persistence of misrepresentation and the materialization of resistance.

This research is also supported by the critical analysis of several westerns, contemporary films, and television series. The media supporting this research were selected for different reasons. *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023) are mentioned as examples of commercial productions entirely written and directed by Indigenous people. Additionally, they both employ humor as a powerful tool to reclaim the Native American image. Indeed, these works are examples of Indigenous writers and creators combining the tool of resistance with the capacity of media. *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) is analyzed as a commercial example of visual sovereignty and cultural consultation. These works represent the answer to the stereotypes present in many western films. In conclusion, it is important to note the media mentioned was produced by members of different Native nations. Though there are common threads, there is no one definitive Native experience.

Before I present the findings in this paper, and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, I recognize that my identity as a citizen of the Cherokee Nation citizen and a Native American have influenced my worldview. I began this research with an interest in understanding whether the increase in Native American representation reflected meaningful change within the entertainment industry. After witnessing many discussions surrounding Native representation online and in person at film festivals and on film sets, I found myself compelled by the perspective Native cast and crew shared regarding how contemporary representation is evolving. With this research, I hope to better understand how representation has progressed and how institutions can better support Native

American storytelling. Additionally, I acknowledge that my positionality influenced this project to some extent, as is the nature of research, which is never perfectly unbiased.

Literature Review

Native Americans have been the subject of film since Thomas Alva Edison premiered the kinetoscope at the 1893 Chicago Columbian World's Exposition and premiered the *Hopi Snake Dance* (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003). Few subjects were as popular in the early years of silent film as the Native American (Jay, 2000). The first feature-length film shot in Hollywood, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Squaw Man* was one of many documentaries, shorts, and feature films containing Native American topics produced from the turn of the century through 1920 (Jay, 2000). This early filmography includes countless stereotypes (Jay, 2000). This resulted in what is often referred to as the *Hollywood Indian*, a name tacked onto the mythological being who exists solely within the confines of Hollywood pictures (2003). The Hollywood Indian is a purely fictional identity that combines different tribal cultures into a single generic role (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003). This role was often depicted as violent and primitive (Jay, 2000) and traditionally served as a default enemy.

In *Playing Indian*, Deloria (1998) (Standing Rock Sioux / Yankton Dakota) argues that throughout American history, repeated cultural performances of Indianness have influenced collective understandings of Native and non-Native identity. These performances did not seek to understand Native Americans as contemporary communities but instead appropriated Indianness as a symbolic resource for defining Americanness. Deloria (1998) explains:

Indian play was a temporary fantasy... and the player inevitably returned to the everyday world. But the world to which one returned was not that of Indian people, and, in that sense, play allowed one to evade the very reality that it suggested one was experiencing. (p. 184)

Europeans and Americans frequently played Indian in Wild West shows, Boy Scout rituals, and early film to reaffirm their legitimate connection to nature while neglecting authentic Native American culture. By presenting Indianness as costume, spectacle, or nostalgic frontier mythology, the dominant American culture rehearsed a version of Native American identity detached from lived reality. In seeing non-Natives perform Indianness in symbolic rituals generation after generation, audiences learned to interpret Indianness not as a living identity but as a historical performance. The repetition of these messages promoted an inaccurate shared social reality in which Native American cultures have vanished and belong in the past (Deloria, 1998). It is this reality that defined Americanness as non-Native.

In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor (White Earth Anishinaabe) primarily defines "Indian" as a simulation, a colonial invention, or a misnomer rather than an accurate representation of Native Americans (1994). He critiques the literature of dominance that produces simulations which are copies of copies that do not exist. The Indian, in this sense, is not a person but a misnomer with a "curious sense of legal standing" (Vizenor, 1994, p. 14). Stereotypical depictions of Native Americans in Hollywood films demonstrate this simulation. The cinematic Indian functioned as a transferable costume rather than a living identity, reinforcing Deloria's observation that Indianness had long been staged as historical theater (1998).

Misrepresentation

Hollywood cinema has historically exploited stereotypical depictions of Native Americans for comic effect. One example of this phenomenon is redfacing. This is the practice of casting non-Native actors in Native roles (Raheja, 2010). When non-Native actors don braids, buckskin, and war paint on screen, they are participating in a longer tradition of performing Indianness for national consumption (Deloria, 1998). This distorts cultural authenticity and promotes harmful stereotypes. Redfacing was often deployed through humor (Manning, 2020), thereby allowing racialized stereotypes to be offered as harmless entertainment. By repeatedly presenting Native identity as costume, caricature, or parody, redfacing contributes to the symbolic annihilation of Native cultures. Symbolic annihilation, sometimes referred to as symbolic erasure or symbolic invisibility, occurs when characters of a certain race are trivialized, degraded, underrepresented, condemned, or represented as incompetent (Manning, 2020).

Another enduring stereotype in Hollywood cinema contributing to symbolic annihilation is the *violent savage*, which presents Native Americans as inherently vicious, naked, and heathen (Singer, 2001). This trope functions to legitimize colonial violence by depicting Native resistance as unprovoked brutality while promoting settler expansion as righteous or inevitable (Singer, 2001). In contrast, the *noble savage* stereotype portrays Native Americans as pure and in harmony with nature. Though, they are still depicted as tragically uncivilized and doomed to extinction in the face of modernity (Raheja, 2010). They may also be represented as a good and honorable figure who provides help to the other characters by showing them the ways of the terrain (Singer, 2001). One of the most prolific examples is Disney's *Pocahontas* (Kilpatrick, 1995). In some narratives, these

two archetypes can conflict, as is the case in *Last of the Mohicans*, with its climactic drama involving tribal violence, a White woman captive, and closing physical contest between the savage and noble Native characters (Hearne, 2012). In this film, the two were differentiated, of course, by costume (Hearne, 2012).

Drawing from Marubbio's (2006) analysis of Native American representation in early cinema, much of the iconography discussed in this research depicts Native American culture as already disappearing. This trope is referred to as the *vanishing Indian*. Vanishing Indians portray Native Americans as relics of the past who have disappeared or are doomed to (Raheja, 2010). Early romantic Indian films emphasized Native people as noble but disappearing alongside the wilderness. Though, the vanishing Indian trope does not merely depict disappearance. In these narratives the disappearance is seemingly inevitable, thereby converting violent colonial conquest into an unavoidable tragedy. This allows the audience to connect to the material emotionally without confronting colonial violence (Marubbio, 2006).

Not only are these racialized tropes, but they are also gendered. Marubbio (2006) notes the nuances of these tropes with female Native American characters. Native women are often used as markers of a vanishing race with their death symbolizing the closing of the frontier. The repeated death, sacrifice, or disappearance of Native female characters signals the triumph of settler culture while erasing Native American sovereignty. In these narratives, female Native characters are removed of their agency and become vehicles for the justification of Western expansion. Native women vanishing through literal death or tragic sacrifice was more common in early cinema (Marubbio, 2006). Today, Hollywood often enacts the trope through omission and underrepresentation. The absence of Native

American writers, directors, and characters in mainstream media reflect this idea of Native American people, particularly Native American women, being marginal to contemporary American life.

These racialized and gendered tropes exist even within films that attempt historical authenticity. Terrence Malick's *The New World* demonstrates this. In this film, Pocahontas becomes a metaphor for the New World itself (Holm, Tom, et al., 2017). Rather than embodying a historical sovereign political figure, her character stands as a symbol of purity and colonial freedom (Holm, Tom, et al., 2017). Although the film included Native American consultants and cast an Indigenous actress, its narrative ultimately reinforces disappearance. Pocahontas converts, marries John Rolfe, aids colonial survival, and dies in England, while her husband and child return to stake their claim in America (Holm, et al., 2017). This is how the vanishing Indian trope operates not only through death, but through disappearance altogether.

Western films promoted powerful ideas that defined who is included in the American narrative and who is excluded. John Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *Stagecoach* are apt examples. Both films present America as a mythical and multicultural nation while simultaneously excluding Native Americans, Black Americans, and Latin Americans (Hoffman, 1997). This illusion of unity erases the actual experiences of people of color (Hoffman 1997). It is important to note that Ford addressed this criticism later in his film career. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Ford stated:

I've killed more Indians than Custer, Beecher and Chivington put together... Let's face it, we've treated them very badly—it's a blot on our shield. We've cheated

and robbed, killed, murdered, massacred and everything else, but they kill one white man and, God, out come the troops. (1967, p. 104)

In the 1960s and 1970s, studios were releasing what is often referred to as Indian sympathy films (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003). In his book, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, Berkhofer perceives that, "The Indian became a mere substitute for the oppressed Black or hippie White youth alienated from the modern mainstream of American society" (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003, p. 28). There have always been cycles of sympathetic films, but harmful savage stereotypes remained prolific in popular culture during this time (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003). Even if it is sympathetic, filmmakers who project images of Native Americans through the lens of hegemonic culture will habitually create movies filled with misleading portrayals (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003).

In *Whose Home on the Range? Finding Room for Native Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans in the Revisionist Western*, Hoffman (1997) argues Indian sympathy films *Dances with Wolves*, *Posse*, and *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* attempt to remedy past transgressions with varying success. In *Dances with Wolves*, the story shifts to appear sympathetic to Native Americans. Yet, the narrative focuses on Lieutenant John Jay Dunbar's diary as the reliable authority validating the story shown on the screen. Since it is the film that invents the diary, this generates a circular claim of authority. Throughout the film, director Kevin Costner never allows audiences to truly see Native Americans, but as Hoffman describes, "force-fixes our gaze upon himself, so that we only see his 'seeing' of Native Americans" (1997, p. 47). Though *Dances with Wolves* radical caricatures of White men intentionally reverse caricatures of Native

Americans in traditional westerns, the story remains framed by the dominant, non-Native perspective rather than the Native one. This example of cinematic storytelling demonstrates how popular American narratives, specifically those of which intrinsically link heroism, progress, and harmony to the White identity, influence film production, and consequently audience understanding (Hoffman, 1997).

A large part of scholarship on Native American representation in mainstream media has focused on cinematic depictions. In *Tribal Television*, Tahmahkera (Comanche Nation) argues that episodic television has played a comparatively significant role in general audience understanding of Native American identity (2014). Television remains an underexamined yet powerful medium where “rare and repetitious Indian characters intended to represent the indigenous” (Tahmahkera, 2014, p. 12). Sitcoms introduce limitless recreations of Native American imagery due to the episode format and wide syndication. Additionally, distorted representation of Native characters is seemingly fixed with Indigenous characters appearing often in thematic episodes. This phenomenon is particularly common every November near Thanksgiving, in which recycled plots, jokes, and representation of Natives often involve storylines between Natives and settlers. This trope is evident from *I Love Lucy* to *The Andy Griffith Show*, *F Troop*, *Barney Miller*, and *Three’s Company*, to *Diff’rent Strokes*, *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park* (Tahmahkera, 2014). This repetitive theme relates to Deloria’s (1998) argument that Indianness has become a resource for settler self-definition.

These television portrayals are not unlike broader historical patterns of representation established in film. Hollywood naturalized recurring stereotypes such as the noble savage and vanishing Indian which continue to cultivate audience expectations

across media (Buffalohead & Marubbio, 2013). Television inherited these archetypes and often simplifies them for comedy (Tahmahkera, 2014). In their pursuit of humor, the narratives constructed and broadcasted by television producers and networks contribute to the placement and displacement of the Indigenous (Tahmahkera, 2014). These patterns persist in modern television (Giaccardi et al., 2024). Even as visibility increases, a large margin of representation on television reflects broader racialized notions within the entertainment industry.

Critical race media scholars have further examined how the media generally operates as a racialized system. In *Critical Race: Challenging Deficit Discourse about Chicanas/os*, Yosso argues that mainstream media relies on racialized notions, or the idea or presumption that certain phenomena, typically negative, are linked to race (2002). It should be noted that a racialized notion can also refer to White individuals. Because they are also informed by stereotypes, these racialized notions are typically associated with positive phenomena such as heroism. Therefore, Yosso argues that Hollywood represents communities of color with deficit discourse, portraying them as lacking complexity, agency, or narrative authority. Deficit discourse promotes harmful language around communities of color in terms of perceived lack or failure while normalizing whiteness as the standard of competence. Although Yosso's study focuses on representations of Chicanas/os, her critique of the entertainment industry's racial logic applies to Native Americans, which have similarly been portrayed through deficit discourse (Yosso, 2002).

Racialized notions help explain why Native American characters, even in seemingly sympathetic films, remain absent from the main narrative. Additionally, it provides context for how these characters are often defined in relation to White

protagonists. This system of racialized notions expands understanding as to why Native self-representation and authorship are essential to disrupting deficit cultural discourse. In the context of media, deficit discourse operates by framing Native American identity as historical or lacking, while reserving narrative agency and complexity for White characters. These indifferent portrayals become normalized through repetition, even in media that claims authenticity or sympathy (Yosso, 2002).

Underrepresentation

Recent data reveals that Native Americans remain marginalized not only within cinema, but within the industry that produces it. Native Americans remain disproportionately underrepresented as actors, writers, and directors. In UCLA's *Hollywood Diversity Report*, Ramón et al. (2025) found there were no Native American lead characters among the top theatrical films of 2024, nor were there Native directors or writers attached to those productions. More recent findings from Ramón et al. (2026) indicate uneven progress in BIPOC representation. The percent of BIPOC directors, writers, and overall casts increased modestly, but BIPOC representation among theatrical film leads declined. Though some progress has been made to broaden diversity in Hollywood, it remains inconsistent.

A study by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and Smith (2025) analyzed the 100 highest grossing theatrical movies from 2007 to 2024. Researchers found that among those 1,800 films, American Indian and Alaska Native characters accounted for only 0.3% across the eighteen-year sample. American Indian and Alaska Native also accounted for less than one percent of speaking characters in 2024. The report further revealed that 98 of the top 100 films released in 2024 contained no Native female

speaking characters, demonstrating the persistent erasure of Native women in top-grossing films (Smith and Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2025). Additionally, Neff et al. (2026) found that Native Americans remain absent from lead roles.

This underrepresentation extends to authorship as well. The Writers Guild of America West *Inclusion & Equity Report* shows that Native American/Indigenous/First Nations writers accounted for less than one percent of screenwriters in 2024 and less than one percent of writers employed on television series in the 2023–24 season (2025). Despite a recent increase in content featuring Native American writers available on television and streaming services, (e.g. *Reservation Dogs*, *Dark Winds*, and *North of North*) the employment data demonstrates no advancement in representation above the line (WGAW, 2025).

The underrepresentation reflected in these reports is consistent with concerns that Native American performers have shared. In a 2024 *Los Angeles Times* interview, Lily Gladstone (Siksikaitsitapii / Nimíipuu) described struggling to sustain a career despite critical acclaim. Their role in *Killers of the Flower Moon* initially consisted of only three scenes before the script was revised (Whipp, 2024). Referencing advice from *Reservation Dogs* creator Sterlin Harjo (Seminole Nation of Oklahoma / Muscogee), Gladstone remarked, “If you're the person who kicks the door down, your job is to stay in the door and keep it open” (Whipp, 2024, para. 17). Their role as Mollie Burkhart marked a significant breakthrough. However, the rarity of such roles demonstrates the scale of the exclusion of these characters from the film industry.

The exclusion of contemporary Native American representation has measurable psychological consequences argues Leavitt, Covarrubias, Perez, and Fryberg (Tulalip

Tribes) in *“Frozen in Time.”* Their research determined that the invisibility of Native Americans in the media undermines self-understanding by homogenizing Native American identity. This resulted in narrow and limited options for self-expression, leading to self-stereotyping. When Native Americans are typically depicted as generic archetypes in 18th and 19th century films, or negatively stereotyped as poor, uneducated, and prone to addictions in contemporary films, this is referred to as relative invisibility. Many groups experience this phenomenon, (e.g., Latin Americans, gay and lesbian, and working-class individuals), but Native Americans are alone in the sense that they uniquely experience absolute invisibility in many areas of American life (Leavitt et al., 2015).

To experience absolute invisibility is to rarely see Native contemporary figures in the media. This absence implies exclusion from mainstream public spaces such as schools and hospitals and professional industries such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers (Leavitt et al., 2015). In this way, Native Americans are more likely than other social groups to see and learn about themselves through the lens of negative stereotypes. Or they may look to the messages projected about Western reality and simply do not see themselves represented. This impacts Native American identities and self-understanding (Leavitt et al., 2015).

Experimental research, including an earlier study by Fryberg and colleagues (2008), demonstrate exposure to stereotypical Native imagery (in this instance the Cleveland Indian mascot, Disney’s *Pocahontas*, and negative stereotypes like dropout rates and rates of alcoholism), led Native American high school and college students to have more negative feelings including decreased self-esteem, decreased community

worth, and depressed academic possibilities. Therefore, when Native Americans are repeatedly shown only as historical figures or social problems, they are provided with fewer contemporary atypical identities (Fryberg et al., 2008). The limited representations also convey to Native Americans that they do not belong and cannot be successful in professional domains such as education and professional employment, thereby increasing the likelihood of self-stereotyping. The scarcity of positive and diverse Native characters also increases the psychological weight of each inaccurate or negative representation, meaning that a single stereotypical image can carry disproportionate influence (Fryberg et al., 2008). The media's narrow portrayals do not merely misinform Native American audiences, they are actively deciding how Native people identify their own potential and place within contemporary society.

Narrative and Visual Sovereignty

If invisibility limits Native American identity and possibility, then sovereignty over media representation becomes essential. Native American filmmakers and scholars argue reclaiming authorship and narrative control is necessary to correct centuries of misrepresentation and exclusion. Contextualizing Indigenous media sovereignty requires expanding on several approaches to Indigenous media sovereignty. This includes visual and narrative sovereignty, both of which contribute to the numerous approaches to media sovereignty. Raheja's (Seneca) concept of visual sovereignty presents Native cinema as an intervention that disrupts deficit discourse by asserting control over images and narrative (2010). Visual sovereignty describes the ways Indigenous filmmakers reclaim the right to represent themselves and their cultures through their own visual and narrative forms (Raheja, 2010). Visual sovereignty simultaneously addresses the dominant culture

by creating self-representations that interact with older stereotypes, but most saliently, connects film production to larger aesthetic practices that work toward strengthening treaty claims and more traditional cultural understanding (Raheja, 2010). Narrative sovereignty works in tandem to provide industry access and creative agency (Hurtubise, 2021).

Narrative sovereignty is generally defined as the ability of Indigenous nations to exercise control over how their stories are told, circulated, and supported within media industries (Hurtubise, 2021). Narrative sovereignty is not confined to a single model and can occur in many different forms. One example is as an initiative enacted by Tribal film organizations. In northeast Oklahoma, several Tribal Nations are making strides in film and media. One example is the Chickasaw Nation. They created Chickasaw Nation Productions, an organization with the mission of sharing the enduring legacy of the Chickasaw Nation and its people through documentary and film (Chickasaw Nation Productions, n.d.). Several of their films have successfully secured distribution to streaming services. Narrative sovereignty is also exercised within mainstream television and streaming content through Native American creative control. Series such as *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023), created by filmmaker, director, and writer Sterlin Harjo, illustrate how narrative sovereignty can be exercised in commercial contexts. In the media industry, Indigenous filmmakers can assert narrative authority by prioritizing contemporary Native perspectives and experiences.

In *Decolonizing Vision: Native Americans, Film and Video Activism*, Sonza provides a critical reflection on Native American media activism, in particular film and video making (2018). Video activism can be a helpful tool in the frame of Native

Americans' struggles for self-representation and sovereignty, reversing the trend established first by the European settlers, and then by the Western media, whose aim was to erase and assimilate Indigenous peoples (Sonza, 2018). Marubbio and Buffalohead's (Ponca Tribe of White Eagle) edited volume *Native Americans on Film: Conversations, Teaching, and Theory* also draws inspiration from the Indigenous film movement, bringing filmmakers into an intertextual conversation with academics from a variety of disciplines (2013). The text offers theoretical approaches to understanding Native cinema, includes pedagogical strategies for teaching films and validates the approaches and perspectives that appear across the movement (Buffalohead & Marubbio, 2013).

Narrative sovereignty is not just valuable to Native American audiences. General audiences also desire authentic Native American representation. In a 2024 study by IllumiNative and the *USC Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project*, two-thirds of the television series analyzed had no Native American crew working behind the camera, but the few that did were received better by audiences (Giaccardi et al., 2024). Additionally, their survey research on programs *Yellowstone*, *Reservation Dogs*, and *Rutherford Falls* found *Yellowstone* viewers were significantly less likely to agree than non-viewers that the U.S. should uphold treaties allowing Native Americans to control their own lands. In contrast, *Rutherford Falls* viewers were shown to be more likely to agree than non-viewers. *Reservation Dogs* viewers were also shown to be more likely to support Native American policies such as the Indian Child Welfare Act. This research illustrates how impactful on-screen narratives can be. When Native Americans are not involved in telling their own stories, there is a higher risk of furthering stereotypes and diminishing political

sovereignty (Giaccardi et al., 2024). This is why narrative sovereignty is a crucial facet of Native American representation.

Performance as Resistance

Although narrative sovereignty is often discussed in relation to contemporary Indigenous media initiatives, Native Americans have long engaged in acts of resistance within Hollywood productions, even when full authorship and control were denied. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Native performers actively contested their representation (Rinehart, 2012). For instance, Performer Antonio Apache rejected colonial expectations by throwing out the "traditional" wigs they expected performers to wear, while Inuit and Kwakiutl performers filed legal action against exploitative managers to protect their autonomy (Rinehart, 2012). Indigenous performers have exercised sovereignty within and against colonial spectacle throughout history, even before film became a popular medium (Rinehart, 2012).

Waggoner's *Starring Red Wing: The Incredible Career of Lilian M. St. Cyr, The First Native American Film Star* provides a detailed biography of early film actress Lilian M. St. Cyr (Ho-Chunk), also known as Red Wing (2019). She was the first Native American woman to star in a feature film and famously resisted early Western cinema's idea of Native Americans. At the time of silent films, performance gave her class and geographic mobility, financial security, and independence from the restriction of White reservation agents. However, taking on these roles had its pitfalls. To combat this, St. Cyr leveraged her legitimacy and influence to reclaim the mythic "Indian princess" stereotype to be perceived as what she called a "real Indian" (Waggoner, 2019, p. 2). She exercised creative agency while building a successful career within the western genre, increasing

her visibility while resisting reductive ideas of Native American identity (Waggoner, 2019).

Black's (Cherokee Nation) *Picturing Indians* extends this examination of Native American portrayals by showing how the production of films from the mid-twentieth century continued to treat Native American talent on film sets (2020). On these sets, Native Americans faced not just misrepresentation as characters, but also mistreatment as employees. Between 1941 and 1960, Native American men and women were hired as extras, consultants and cultural advisors, often under exploitative or unfair conditions. Their participation was a direct contradiction to the vanishing Indian stereotype Hollywood's films often employed. This complicated Hollywood's narrative of total exclusion, since Native Americans working on film sets subtly resisted these stereotypes by asserting their cultural values.

Black (2020) notes citizens of the Diné tribe hold many examples because they had more film extras than any other tribal members in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1960, Diné extra Joe Quivero worked in John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge*. He was quite aware of the fact he was playing an Apache. After falling off his horse per Ford's direction, he stated, "This could never have happened if I'd been playing a Navajo" (p. 103). Quivero makes the simple claim that any Diné would be a skilled rider and would never get shot on a running horse. His protest for playing an Apache was an act of resistance against Hollywood's ongoing stereotypes of Native Americans. This statement is an example of what Black describes as everyday acts of resistance during a time Hollywood was ripe with exploitation (2020).

In “Tricksters of the Trade: ‘Reimagining’ The Filmic Image of Native Americans,” Purdy (2001) argues that Native filmmakers must engage Hollywood’s visual language at the level of imagination itself, not merely correct inaccuracies. Rather than simply rejecting colonial myths, Indigenous artists reimagine them. Because Hollywood’s depictions of Native Americans operate at the level of spectacle and emotional drama, Purdy contends that critique alone is insufficient. Instead, Indigenous creators must engage the same narrative devices such as humor, reversal, and irony to destabilize it from within. This strategy, which Purdy identifies in the works of Vizenor and other Indigenous storytellers, reframes cinema as a catalyst of cultural negotiation (2001).

Vizenor’s concept of the trickster and his theory of survivance provide a crucial framework for understanding this process. Survivance has been interpreted by later scholars to contain essential ideas of Indigenous survival, perseverance, and an ongoing active presence that cannot be ignored (Holm, et al., 2017). Vizenor (2009) further argues that survivance rejects narratives of victimhood and instead emphasizes Native continuance in *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*:

Theories of survivance are elusive and imprecise by definition and in translation. The practices of survivance, however, are obvious and unmistakable in native stories. The nature of survivance creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners. Native survivance is a continuation of stories. (p. 1)

Survivance rejects narratives that present Indigenous peoples as absent and instead asserts Indigenous presence, resistance, and continuance. Importantly, survivance is frequently enacted through irony, humor, and trickster stories. Vizenor's postindian rhetoric destabilizes static colonial representations by parodying and reframing them (2009). In doing this, survivance begins a dialogue with readers and invites reflection.

Early examples of cinematic survivance can be seen in *Smoke Signals* (1998), directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne and Arapaho) and written by Sherman Alexie (Spokane), which is widely regarded as a landmark of Native American film (Hearne, 2012). As Hearne explains in *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising*, the film marks a historical milestone in Native American filmmaking as the first wide-release feature film written, directed, coproduced, and acted by Native Americans. After much critical and financial success, the film has become a Native cinema classic. It has been appreciated by Native and non-Native audiences, even making frequent appearances in high school and college course lists. *Smoke Signals* reaches audiences with a universal story of familial loss and renewal, while embedding uniquely Indigenous ideas about political sovereignty and Hollywood's long history of misrepresentation (Hearne, 2012).

The film recontextualizes Hollywood genre conventions through humor and storytelling, thereby rejecting the vanishing Indian and the noble savage in favor of relatable Native American protagonists. Hearne (2012) notes the "Dances with Salmon" sequence contains the film's most intense pressure felt by some Native American youth to conform to images shown in the media in their everyday lives. In this scene, Victor berates Thomas for his eccentric behavior, asking him, "Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" As the conversation continues, Victor explains his rigid parameters of

what a “real Indian” must look and act like. He argues Indian men don’t talk like a medicine man, grin, wear suits, or keep their hair in braids, all of which apply to Thomas’ personality and appearance. Instead, a Victor insists a “real Indian” man must be mean faced “or people won’t respect you.” Underneath their banter about pop culture depictions of Indian masculinity lie ideas of the stoic Indian stereotype and absence of expression (Hearne, 2012). With adept storytelling and humor, *Smoke Signals* (1998) appropriates the road-trip genre and reimagines it to reflect a Native American experience.

Building further on Vizenor’s concept of survivance, contemporary Indigenous media creators have often used humor as a form of commentary according to Kongerslev (2020) in “Enduring Laughter: Introduction to the Special Issue on Native and Indigenous Humor” published in the journal *Studies in American Humor*. The intertribal comedy group the 1491s adapted this approach in their 2011 video “Smiling Indians,” which directly challenges the enduring stereotype of the stoic Indian. The simple video features numerous Native American and Indigenous faces of all ages smiling and laughing. The visuals are bookended by two short statements: a dedication and an epitaph. The first reads, “This Film Is Dedicated to Edward S. Curtis.” The dedication begins a dialogue about the photographs of Native Americans that were popularized by Curtis, which portrayed Indigenous people as a vanishing race that were humorless and ultimately doomed. In retort, the video reclaims joy and humor as markers of contemporary Indigenous presence with the epitaph declaring, “If you remember nothing else about me, remember that I smiled” (Kongerslev, 2020, p. 254).

Not only does the 1491's "Smiling Indians" debunk Native American stereotypes, but it also demonstrates how comedy can function as a tool of survivance. Mainstream popular culture continues to perpetrate and recreate the humorless stoic Indian figure, even though scholarships from the last century has cited its irrelevance (Kongerslev, 2020). Humor is a part of the Native American identity, and it influences all aspects of life from political affairs to spiritual practices (Kongerslev, 2020). In this sense, tongue-in-cheek pieces like "Smiling Indians" successfully disrupts the narratives that have historically represented Indigenous peoples as symbolic figures. By injecting images of Indigenous people with humor and expressiveness, they create space for Indigenous identity to exist beyond Western expectations. This shift toward humor and self-representation marks a critical transition in Indigenous media, one that moves from theoretical articulations of survivance to widely regarded commercial projects. It is within this evolving landscape that series such as *Reservation Dogs* emerge, extending these concepts into episodic storytelling.

FX's *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023) exemplifies survivance in action. Part of what sets the show apart is its co-creators Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui / Māori) as well as their all-Indigenous writer's room, crew, and regular cast (Kemp, 2022). *Reservation Dogs* follows four Native American teenagers as they navigate living on a reservation in northeast Oklahoma. Over the show's three seasons, plot points cover many topics and themes like humor, tragedy, unresolved grief, survival, popular culture, stereotypes, and more (Campbell, 2024). The show addresses all these subjects while giving audiences an intimate view into the lives of contemporary Native American youth (Campbell, 2024).

Reservation Dogs (2021-2023) almost entirely Indigenous cast and crew use the show's dialogue, visuals, and meta references to represent the Native experience in the 21st century in an authentic way. In doing so, the FX series does not reject Western mythology outright. Instead, it enters ironic dialogue with it, deploying humor to provide an authentic Indigenous perspective (Baron, 2023). Custer jokes, the presence of a comically flawed "warrior spirit," and the blending of coming-of-age drama with sketch comedy operate as Indigenous reappropriations of Western narratives (Baron, 2023). As scholarship on Indigenous cinema notes, Fourth Cinema often appropriates dominant film genres for Indigenous purposes (Holm, et al., 2017). In this sense, *Reservation Dogs* performs survivance by occupying and reshaping dominant cultural ideas about Native Americans. Its humor is an entertaining device, as well as a strategic assertion of narrative sovereignty that refuses deficit discourse while remaining in dialogue with it.

Another contemporary work worth investigating is Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023). Based on David Grann's best-selling book, this film was lauded for its portrayal of the 1920s Reign of Terror in Oklahoma. Among Native American audiences, however, it was divisive. Native viewers celebrated and critiqued the film. Some Native viewers were relieved the story had finally been shared on such a public stage (Kuo, 2023). Some also praised the movie's effort to highlight Osage history with Indigenous actors in prominent roles (Smith, 2023). Others were disappointed in the narrative portrayed on the screen and believed it did not sufficiently center the Native Americans involved in the story, focusing too much on the White antagonists (Kuo, 2023). Additionally, some expressed reservations about its graphic violence and lack of

historical context (Smith, 2023). The lack of an Indigenous screenwriter or director was also cited as an issue (Smith, 2023).

It is important to note the Osage Nation was consulted on *Killers of the Flower Moon* (Kaur, 2023). Before production of the film began, the Osage Nation expressed their concerns, as well as their desire to be involved in bringing the story to cinemas (Kaur, 2023). After meeting with the director, the production decided to overhaul the initial script (Kaur, 2023). Countless Osage people worked in each facet of the production from consultation and costuming to language and acting. This close collaboration resulted in a level of authenticity that had not been previously seen in a mainstream Hollywood project about Native Americans (Kaur, 2023). Mainstream films like *Killers of the Flower Moon* demonstrate a more complex negotiation between consultation and narrative sovereignty. Though the film teaches Osage history and casts Native American actors in significant roles, it remains at the helm of the vision of a non-Native director. This raises questions about the extent of which cultural consultation can contribute to narrative sovereignty, and whether visibility and consultation alone can be considered sufficient representation.

In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau (2023) reported that more than 574 Native American Nations were still officially recognized by the United States government, with almost nine million people self-identifying as American Indian or Alaska Natives, mixed or not. This is almost double the population reported in the 2010 Census (Jones et al., 2021). Despite that growing number, the narratives, ideology, and policy of dominant Western forces construct throughout centuries still perpetuates the issue of complete invisibility. Throughout history, research demonstrates media has had an instrumental

part of determining the racial reality of Native Americans. As media and race scholars note, race is a shifting yet reforming system of meanings that influences how individuals understand themselves and others (Murphee, 2016). Mainstream media actively cultivates ideas about members of a certain race (Murphee, 2016). Mass media historian Jane Rhodes explains, “The struggle between the transmission of racial ideology and the efforts of opposition groups to claim control over their image” (Murphee, 2016, p. 23).

In the context of Native American representation, Hollywood has historically simulated Indianness as spectacle, stereotype, and disappearance (Deloria, 1998; Vizenor, 1994), thereby reinforcing racialized notions (Yosso, 2002) that portray Native American people as doomed in the face of modernity. Even well-intentioned narratives can promote stereotypes, thereby promoting deficit discourse and resulting in exclusion (Yosso, 2002; Hoffman, 1997). Recent data confirms the absence of Native American characters and stories is more than a surface-level issue. It is also an industry-wide one, with Native absence persisting in front of the camera, in the writers’ rooms, and in the director’s chair (WGA, 2025). Empirical research further demonstrates negative stereotypes and invisibility have a psychological effect on identity formation, and influence audience perception (Leavitt et al., 2015). Media, therefore, functions as a powerful site of racial understanding with tangible psychological and political consequences.

In response to this, Indigenous people have increasingly leveraged mainstream communication channels to represent themselves, thereby meeting their own political and cultural needs (Wilson & Stuart 2008). In *Global Indigenous Media*, Prins explains this push for self-representation that began in the 1970s, “In an intervention that paralleled the postcolonial move to ‘write back’ against colonial masters, Indian activists began to

‘shoot back,’ reversing the colonial gaze by constructing their own visual media, telling their stories on their own terms” (2008, p. 4). Media sovereignty shoots back by reimagining media as a site of survivance (Vizenor, 2009). Narrative and visual sovereignty challenge the colonial invention of the cinematic Indian by asserting Indigenous presence and authorship (Hurtubise, 2021; Raheja, 2011). Projects such as *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023) demonstrate how Indigenous creators appropriate and transform mainstream cinematic tropes, while divergent reactions to *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) reveal the ongoing negotiation between cultural consultation and narrative sovereignty. These developments suggest the future of Native representation is not determined by visibility alone, but also on access to media-making resources traditionally used as a colonial tool of domination and using it instead for self-representation.

Methodology

This study employs a concurrent embedded strategy of mixed methods (Creswell, 2014) in which qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously. In this design, the qualitative interviews are the primary method that guides the project, while the survey acts as a secondary database which provides a supporting role in the research (Creswell, 2014). This design enables the study to prioritize the Native American voice while also incorporating measurable audience trends, thereby strengthening the overall analysis. The data for both methods was collected concurrently during April 2026. The interviews were conducted from March 16, 2026, to April 10, while the survey was published on April 9, 2026, and remained open until April 30. Survey findings were used

to contextualize and support themes identified in the interview data, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Research Design

This study is grounded in Indigenous research methodologies, particularly the work of Smith (2012), who emphasizes the importance of prioritizing Indigenous voices, experiences, and ways of knowing within the research process. As Smith (2012) and other Indigenous scholars have noted, Western research traditions have historically remained as the standard of legitimate knowledge. This critique is echoed by scholars who note that Indigenous people have been “researched to death,” stressing the need for more ethical and community-oriented approaches to research (Henry et al., 2023, p. 46).

Smith (2012) argues that Western disciplines have largely represented the Indigenous world, consequently marginalizing Indigenous ways of knowing. In response, Indigenous research methodologies emphasize reclaiming the search for new knowledges by prioritizing Indigenous perspectives (Smith, 2012). This study adopts that approach by prioritizing interviews with Native media professionals whose experiences provide rich data on how Native American storytelling and representation are negotiated within the contemporary entertainment industry. These principles inform the design of this study by prioritizing the voices and experiences of the participants through qualitative interviews. In doing so, this research is compliant with desired research practices that respect Native American ways of knowing and lived experience.

Building on critiques of colonial research practices, qualitative methodologies emphasize the importance of storytelling and community-oriented knowledge. Denzin (2023) argues that qualitative research can serve as a site of resistance by prioritizing

marginalized voices and challenging dominant epistemologies. In the context of this study, these approaches support the use of semi-structured interviews with Native American media professionals. This method allows participants to articulate their experiences with representation and authorship in their own terms.

This method is expanded upon by Pidgeon and Riley's (2021) definition of Indigenous research methodologies (IRMs). Their analysis determined Indigenous research methodologies must be grounded in respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility — often referred to as the Four Rs. In terms of methodology, IRMs value contextual and story-based understanding rather than generalizations. Indigenous methods such as storytelling are a legitimate way of sharing knowledge, therefore qualitative interviews are the most appropriate method for this research (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021).

To comply with Indigenous research methodologies, this study employed qualitative interviews because they are not strictly scripted (Yin, 2016). Therefore, the interviewer did not adopt any uniform behavior or demeanor for every interview. Rather, these interviews had a conversational tone, and the interview itself led to a social relationship of sorts, with the quality of the relationship individualized to each participant (Yin, 2016). This allows for more anecdotal, salient information to come forth. This study's qualitative interviews with media professionals are designed to prioritize community voice and ownership of knowledge. Congruent with IRMs, this research will prioritize participants' perspectives as collaborators, ensuring ethical conduct, and cultural respect throughout the research process.

This work is inspired by Black's *Picturing Indians* which prioritizes the many people who produced movies and the community contexts in which they worked (2020). Connecting Black's method of analyzing archival sources and oral histories, this research will also include new qualitative data from interviewees. The same method is used by Sonza (2018), who draws from interviews of people as diverse as filmmakers, scholars, and social workers. This study is also influenced by the qualitative interviews conducted by Moraca and Nuntiis (2022) who conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate Indigenous media professionals' experiences and perspectives. Similarly, this research will use in-depth interviews to understand Indigenous media professional's experience within the entertainment industry, as well as their thoughts on misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and industry challenges.

Building upon qualitative interviews, this study incorporates a survey to examine how general audiences perceive Native American representation in film and television. The purpose of the survey is to investigate how audiences interpret and evaluate Native representation in contemporary media. Specifically, this study employs a survey to examine the impact of films, television series, and streaming media with Native American characters and storylines on viewers' opinions toward Native American representation. By combining qualitative interviews with survey data, this allows researchers to examine lived experiences and broader audience perceptions, thereby strengthening the overall analysis.

Data Collection

The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews which allowed for consistency across participants and flexibility in exploring individual

experiences. The question list in Figure 1 was developed to address key topics examined in this study. Despite the number of participants, it is crucial to understand that Native American cultures are not a monolith. There are 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States, 38 alone in the state of Oklahoma where most of these participants reside (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.; U.S. Department of Justice, 2025). Therefore, there are many different points of convergence, and there is no need to generalize statements.

The study originally aimed to recruit approximately 8–10 Native media professionals representing a range of roles within film and television production. This includes filmmakers, directors, producers, actors, screenwriters, cultural consultants, and other professionals. These participants were recruited through their publicly available email addresses or websites. In the end, this study attained nine interview participants. Study participants either had or were currently working in the entertainment industry, as this narrows the research to understand the perspective of that professional environment. Participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) to ensure confidentiality. All identifying information for participants were omitted to allow participants the freedom to express their opinions comfortably.

These interviews were conducted via video and phone calls. The video calls result in the use of electronic recording as a data collection technique (Yin, 2016). The researcher used Adobe Premiere Pro transcribing tool to transcribe the audio track from the video call and deleted the video chat. These audio recordings and transcripts were exported to an external hard drive kept in the researcher's home office and the other copy to a separate flash drive for backup. Often, audio transcription services like Premiere Pro's tool can misinterpret words, mostly when participants use industry terminology. In

cases where certain terms were misspelled, the researcher could easily correct the transcript. However, the researcher also stored the audio file to access if there were any questions about the participants' intended statements.

Figure 1

Questions included in the interview.

Background

Can you describe your current role in the film and/or media industry?

What initially drew you to this profession?

Misrepresentation

How do you feel Native Americans have historically been represented in film and television?

From your perspective, which stereotypes or patterns have been most persistent or damaging?

Cultural Authenticity

What changes have you noticed, positive or negative, in Native representation during your career?

What does authentic Native representation mean to you?

Future Representation

What kinds of Native stories or characters do you believe are most needed right now?

What changes in the industry would most support Native self-representation moving forward?

The survey was administered through Qualtrics, an online survey platform commonly used in academic research. Participants ($n = 335$) were recruited using nonprobability sampling methods, which are often necessary for research projects with a quick turnaround (Dillman, 2014). More specifically, this survey recruited respondents using convenience sampling through social media posts on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Reddit. The online survey approach was deployed because it allows for efficient data collection across large and geographically diverse populations (Dillman et al., 2014). In addition to sharing organic posts on Facebook, the survey link was also promoted using a paid Facebook advertisement. This digital advertisement targeted a custom audience based on demographic information and subjects of interest provided by the platform. This digital method was employed to expand participant reach and increase the diversity of responses. Along with social media promotion, print flyers and email distribution were also used to distribute the survey. The recruitment flyers included a QR code for the online survey. Participants were asked to agree to the informed consent form which states their voluntary participation and provided information regarding the research.

The questionnaire also included three demographic questions for age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, the survey asked about the frequency of media consumption. The questions also measured audience attitudes toward Native American representation using a series of Likert-type scale questions ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Likert-scale questions are commonly used in survey research to measure attitudes and perceptions because they allow respondents to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement (Fowler, 2014). In addition, participants

rated their evaluations of certain statements using five-point semantic differential scales (e.g., very poor–very good, worsening–improving, not important–extremely important). Responses across related items were aggregated to create composite scores representing participants’ overall perceptions of Native American representation in media. Participants were not compensated.

In this questionnaire, regular media viewers were defined as those who watch a film, television show, or streaming content at least once a week. Audiences are also asked how often they encounter Native American characters in the media they consume. More specifically, participants were asked if they have viewed key films and series that feature Native American characters and narratives. The television shows and streaming series included *Reservation Dogs*, *Dark Winds*, *Rutherford Falls*, and *North of North*. Additionally, participants are also asked if they viewed the films *Killers of the Flower Moon*, *Rez Ball*, *Smoke Signals*, *Prey*, and *Powwow Highway*. These films and series were selected because they feature Indigenous characters and were produced with significant Indigenous creative involvement either through consultation or other above the line representation. In addition to these target media, the survey also asked questions about participants’ attitudes regarding Native American representation. This included whether Native American cultures are represented accurately with care, the realism of their portrayal, and whether it was important for Native American stories to be written or directed by Native Americans.

The Internal Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Oklahoma approved this research to work with human subjects. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided consent prior to participation. This study ensured

confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and storing data securely. Participants were given the option to decline answering any questions and could withdraw from the study at any time. In compliance with Indigenous research methodologies, this research aimed to respect participant voice and ensure accurate representation of responses, as well as maintaining ethical responsibility throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, thereby allowing themes to develop organically from the qualitative data (Ahmed et al., 2025). Inductive thematic analysis provides a structured yet flexible approach to coding, searching for themes, and interpreting and naming themes within qualitative data (Ahmed et al., 2025). It also offers a richer description of the overall data (Nowell et al., 2017). Keeping Indigenous research methodologies in mind, this analytical approach is appropriate for examining interviews and investigating beyond surface-level observations to uncover salient themes that reflect deeper cultural and social meanings (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize participants' responses and identify patterns in audience perceptions of Native American representation in media. Given the use of nonprobability sampling, statistical analysis was used to identify trends rather than to generalize findings to a larger population. The data was analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), to look for common themes. SPSS is a software package that allows users to statistically analyze data. It is commonly used in research to examine results from research studies. In the context of this study's mixed-methods design, these quantitative findings complement

qualitative interview data, allowing for a broader understanding of industry perspectives and audience opinion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These quantitative findings were then compared with themes identified in the qualitative interview data to provide a broader understanding of Native representation in contemporary media.

Results

This study acquired data from interviews with nine Native American participants who were or had previous experience working in the entertainment industry. Their roles ranged from filmmakers, scriptwriters, directors, producers, actors, cultural consultants, and more. Many participants identified with multi-hyphenate roles, i.e. (writer / producer / director) as many members of this industry are often cross trained to fill multiple roles if needed. Since this data was collected first and is the primary source for this analysis, it will be referred to as data set 1.

The researcher categorized the data according to the research questions' topics, i.e. Misrepresentation and erasure, Cultural authenticity and accuracy, Future representation, and Industry barriers and challenges. Examples for each theme can be found in Figure 2. These themes categorize the persistent challenges in Native American representation and future industry practices that may help facilitate more authentic and nuanced storytelling.

Figure 2

Themes established from data set 1.

Theme	Description	Quote
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<i>Cultural Authenticity and Accuracy</i>	Representation that reflects accurate cultural practices and perspectives through direct involvement of Native American individuals and communities.	“You have to have those Nations represented on set.”
<i>Misrepresentation and Erasure</i>	The portrayal of Native Americans through redfacing, as well as through limited or stereotypical roles that fail to reflect the diversity and complexity of the Native American identity.	"There has just been one singular representation, portrayed on screen... with a headdress and in leather.”
<i>Barriers and Challenges</i>	Structural limitations within the film and television industry that restrict Indigenous participation, including gatekeeping, funding limitations, lack of institutional support, and limited access to filmmaking resources.	“The biggest hardship... is being distributed by a large group.”
<i>Future Representation</i>	Developing opportunities for Native representation that reflect core tenants of media sovereignty.	“We have this whole renaissance of Native American stories and representation... coming out right now. And it's needed.”

Misrepresentation and Erasure

All nine participants described some problematic element regarding past Native American representation. There were several stereotypes mentioned. P1 discussed redfacing, “if you go even farther back... there is problematic stuff where it's obviously non-Natives playing Native roles... to make themselves seem more Native they put on the brown paint.” P3 describes a common trope of depicting Native Americans “with a headdress and in leather.” P5 echoed this thought stating, “it’s not all plains, horses and headdresses.” P6 states, “we are not leather and feather.” These excerpts reflect a common sentiment toward Hollywood’s fraught history of including these characters as symbols of frontier iconography.

Several participants describe past representation as narrow or limited. P3 states, “I think the world of Native American representation has been so narrow in media. And it's really disappointing because we are such a vibrant people. We are comprised of so many different tribes.” Similarly, P8 noted that Native people were frequently used as “background to someone else’s story,” highlighting their marginalization within Hollywood westerns. Not only is past representation described as narrow but also limited to lesser roles. On “Dances with Wolves,” P5 shares, “it didn't really seem like a Native movie to me. It's just Kevin Costner's up front and center, you know? A lot of times we were always in the background.”

Several participants extended this critique beyond surface-level stereotyping to address deeper structural issues within Western storytelling. One participant argued that the core issue is not simply visibility, but that “people don’t see Indians as humans... because of how they are placed in story.” One participant believed Native Americans had

historically not been represented at all, and the Indian on the screen was something else entirely (echoing Vizenor's concept of Indians being mythological creatures limited only to cinema). As P7 notes, "Representation of Natives wasn't really a representation, it was like Blackface." P9 continues with this thought on past narrative structures, "as I got older and I started to deconstruct and construct stories, I realized that the Indian part is kind of immaterial to the structure of the story." P9 went on to explain how Indian characters have been inserted into narratives are not dissimilar to conventions in ancient Western storytelling, "You can trace that back to the Western story structure and the placement of the barbarians in Rome and in Greek mythology, and just that conflict and how they're positioned in place. And those tactics just kept carrying it forward." Misrepresentation does not just operate on an industry level regarding who gets cast and who does not. It operates at the creative level in Western narrative structure. As another participant noted, these portrayals are often "not historically accurate" and reflect "lazy" storytelling practices that prioritize familiar tropes over nuance (P3).

Another critique that appeared in several of the interviews was the absence of contemporary Native American life in media, and what life is represented typically focused on historical or trauma-based narratives. P4 shares, "They're represented in a very much more of a historical fashion, than I would say in a real life." He went on to explain, "I just think we just need to see Natives as human beings that go to the gas station and get a Red bull." As P3 stated, "we need just the everyday stories," emphasizing the lack of representation of modern Native experiences. Collectively, these responses demonstrate that a core tenant of misrepresentation is not only stereotypes, but also the denial of full humanity.

Cultural Authenticity and Accuracy

All participants emphasized the importance of authenticity, particularly through Native American storytelling and accurate cultural consultation. Across interviews, authenticity was consistently defined as the ability for Native people to tell their own stories, rather than being represented through outside perspectives. P3 explained, “for too long, it was not Native people telling our stories.” Similarly, P8 highlighted that meaningful change occurs when “Native voices [are] actually telling their stories.” Authenticity was also defined in terms of specificity and diversity, rather than a singular or monolithic Native American image. P5 stated that “there’s not a singular Native experience,” noting differences across geography, community, and lived experience. This perspective challenges homogenization and reinforces the importance of specificity in storytelling. Together, these responses suggest authenticity is not only about accuracy, but about who has the authority to define said accuracy.

Cultural consultation is frequently mentioned as a solution to misrepresentation. Several participants felt passionately about involving tribal nations on set; “they need to go to the source and not just make stuff up” said P1. “You have to have those nations represented on set” stressed P2. However, participant responses suggest that authenticity is more complex and negotiated in practice. P2 illustrates this tension through an anecdote about *Dances with Wolves* (1990), recalling that at a premiere they attended, Lakota audience members questioned Kevin Costner’s speech because he spoke in female Lakota dialect. Additionally, this participant described their various duties associated as a cultural consultant. They described the role as often department-wide, involving costumes, props, script supervising, language, and more. They are also

expected to justify and negotiate the expense of consultation services with studio executives, too. “Consultants really do producer work” stated P2. This reveals the extensive experience cultural consultancy requires. Not only do cultural consultants serve as historians and liaisons for other experts and talent, but they must also navigate the complexities of the commercial entertainment industry.

Across participants, authenticity was understood as more Indigenous people being involved in production. As P9 put it, “if someone was writing a book about you and you were not engaged in the narrative of your own story, how would you feel?... everyone on this Earth, that's the one thing that we really want, is to be seen and heard.” P3 believes “authentic Native representation... is just real-life stories from the perspective of Native people.” “Native people telling their own stories is great” stated P5. This practice of storytelling to correct the record goes back decades. P8 goes into detail, “it was up to Native American people and like storytellers and filmmakers to sort of get ourselves away from that and move ourselves away from [those] sort of stereotypes.” In this sense, authenticity is not a fixed standard, but an ongoing process. This process requires Indigenous involvement, especially in constructing stories.

Importantly, some participants offered a different perspective of authenticity by resisting the idea that Native American stories must always center identity. P9 argued that stories “should be able to function on the merits of the craft and the quality of the story,” rather than existing solely because it is a Native American story. Similarly, P4 shared an anecdote about being expected to write Native American narratives because of their racial identity. “I think the diversity is helpful to a degree, but it's more of a hindrance in a way, because you I get asked to do Native festivals... or I get thrown into regular festivals

because I'm Native. I don't want to get chosen because I'm Native.” In this sense, freedom from external constraints or expectations is necessary to portray Native American characters and their stories as fully human and multidimensional.

Future Representation

This research fostered discussions about the future of Native American representation with all nine participants. Many emphasized growing progress and ongoing needs. Many participants noted positive shifts, particularly the increasing visibility of Native American creators and stories. One participant described this as “more authentic representation,” while another emphasized the significance of seeing “your stories from your childhood played out on the screen” (P3). These responses highlight the emotional and cultural impact of representation, particularly for Native American audiences.

Participants also stressed the importance of expanding the range of stories being told. Several called for narratives that move beyond trauma and historical subjects to include more positive moments. As P3 explained, Native stories should include “stories of triumph... joy... and excitement” that overall represent a broader emotional spectrum. Another participant similarly noted that limiting representation to a single tone or theme prevents audiences from seeing “the full spectrum of what it means to be a human” (P9).

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of representation in front of the camera and behind it. P8 noted that representation is not only about visibility, but also about “who’s getting pulled up behind the scenes,” highlighting the need for sustainable career pathways for Native American creators. Collectively, these responses demonstrate that future representation is not simply about increasing visibility of Native American

characters or storytellers. It also involves a deliberate approach to diversifying the Native American film genre. To do this, the film industry with its various institutions and modes of funding must reevaluate their expectations of what a Native American story may mean and provide Native American filmmakers with more creative autonomy.

Industry Barriers and Challenges

Barriers and challenges within the industry is a consistent theme in this study with nine participants identifying it as a central issue. Participants discussed several constraints within the film industry. These challenges were all related to different forms of funding, access, and gatekeeping, and they all limit the possibility of Native American representation in mainstream media regardless of creative potential. Funding surfaced as a primary concern. P7 stated that lack of capital is a “huge roadblock.” Similarly, P8 noted that Native projects often struggle because studios prioritize whether a project will “translate to box office revenue.” Because the film industry is driven by profit, whether a film can generate money is a major factor in decision making. But “if you gave Native filmmakers funding, you’d see an explosion of talent” mentioned P5.

The contrast between traditional Western narratives, or what a film audience may expect, and Indigenous stories, was also mentioned. On this, P6 shares, “The wider audience means you have to balance wide expectations of genre and storytelling conventions... sometimes those don't align with Indigenous practices of storytelling.” Several participants noted that Native American stories are often treated as niche with limited audience appeal. As one participant explained, studios frequently assume “there’s not a big enough audience,” reinforcing barriers to production and distribution (P9). To

that, P3 poses open-mindedness: “people need to widen their scope of what they’re looking for.”

Beyond funding and mainstream appeal, participants also described systemic gatekeeping within the film industry. For example, P8 noted that Native American-led film projects often require well-known non-Native actors to be on the bill, stating that “it had to be a name Caucasian actor... [to] get the project greenlit.” Participants explained this barrier continues to prefer established, and often non-Native talent. The issue is not the amount of talent, as P7 states, “The talent, stories, and crew are already there.” The issue at hand, instead, is “access and trust” (P8).

There were also discussions of broader issues of infrastructure and access. These include lack of Native American talent and managers, limited networking opportunities and support systems, insufficient training and educational opportunities, and struggles to establish long-term careers due to limited job opportunities. Together, these findings indicate representation is not solely a creative issue. It is also an industry-wide issue established by key decision-making entities that determine which stories are produced and distributed.

Survey

Data set 2 consists of 335 survey responses. Because not all participants completed every survey item, analyses were conducted using available responses for each question. Participants who did not complete the demographic portion of the survey were removed. These items were necessary to categorize respondents by Native and non-Native identity for comparison. Additionally, responses with less than 50% survey completion were removed to minimize the inclusion of incomplete or low-quality data.

The final analytic sample consisted of 297 participants. Analyses were conducted using all available responses from participants who provided this information.

Figure 3

Participant Age Range

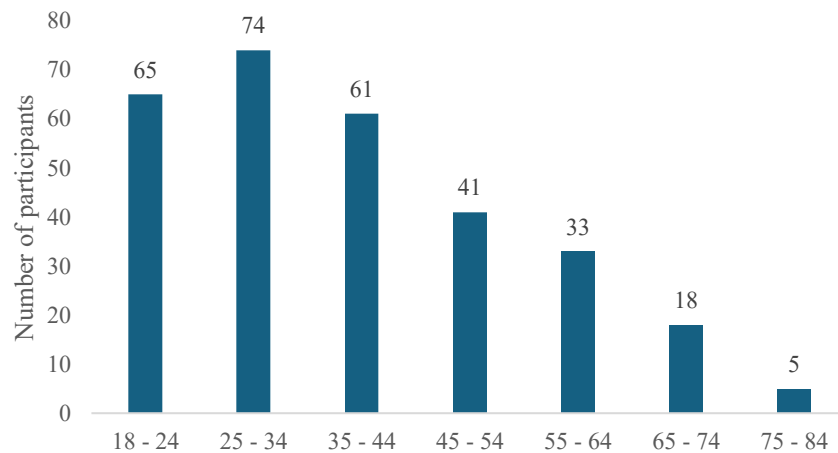
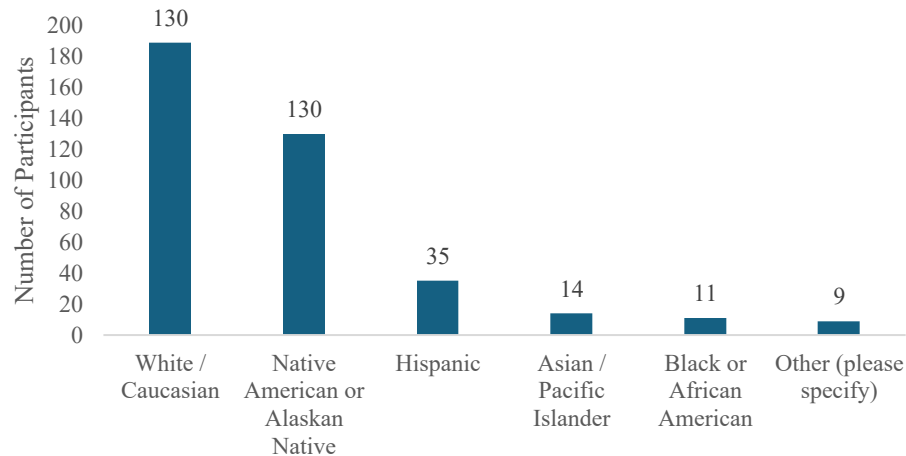


Figure 3 presents the age distribution of participants ($n = 297$). The sample primarily consists of younger respondents, with the largest portion falling between the ages of 25–34 (24.9%). This age group was followed by those aged 18–24 (21.9%) and 35–44 (20.5%). Participation declined across older age groups, with 45–54 (13.8%), 55–64 (11.1%), and 65–74 (6%) showing progressively smaller representation. The smallest group consisted of participants aged 75–84 (1.7%). In terms of gender identity, most participants identified as female (65.7%), followed by male (23.6%). 7.4% of respondents identified as non-binary and 2% preferred to self-describe. 1.3% preferred not to answer.

Figure 4

Participant Race/Ethnicity



Note. Participants could select more than one category.

Figure 4 presents most respondents identified as White/Caucasian (63.6%), followed by Native American or Alaska Native (43.8%). Smaller proportions of participants identified as Hispanic/Latino (11.8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (4.7%), Black/African American (3.7%), or another racial/ethnic identity (3%). Because participants could select more than one category, percentages exceed 100%. A key variable in the study was whether participants identified as Native American. In this sample, 43.8% of participants identified as Native American/Alaskan Native, while 56.2% were non-Native.

Figure 5

How often do you watch a film, television show, or streaming content?

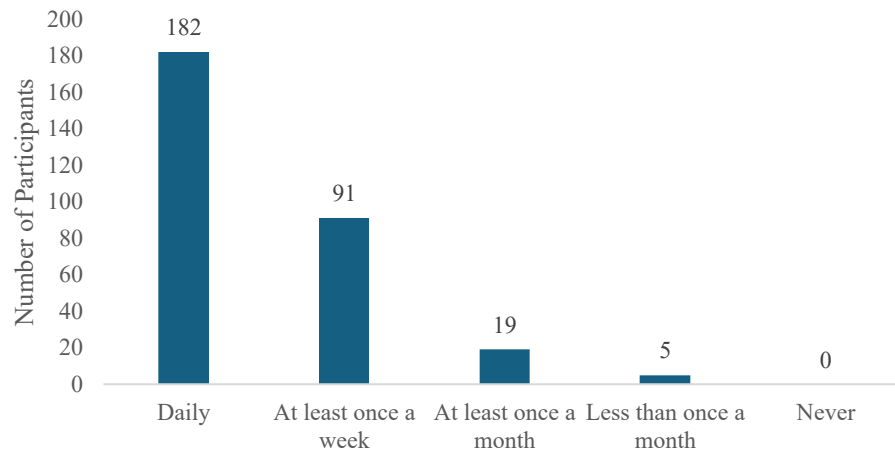
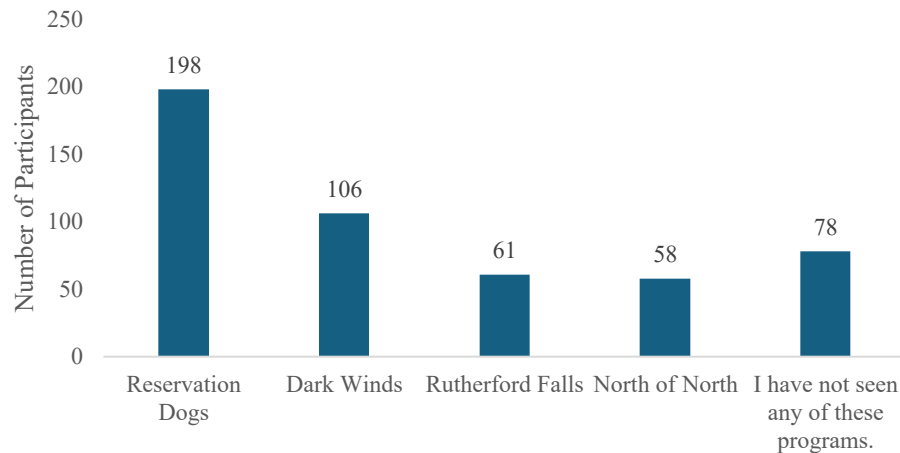


Figure 5 illustrates participants' media consumption habits ($n = 297$). Most respondents (91.9%) reported engaging with film, television, or streaming content either daily (61.3%) or at least once per week (30.6%). This indicates most of the participants consumed media regularly. Smaller portions of participants reported consuming media at least once a month at 6.4%. Only 1.7% reported watching media less than once a month. No participants indicated that they never consume media. Overall, the findings indicate that the sample consists predominantly of frequent media consumers with minimal representation from infrequent consumers.

Figure 6

Have you watched any of the following television or streaming shows that feature Native American characters?



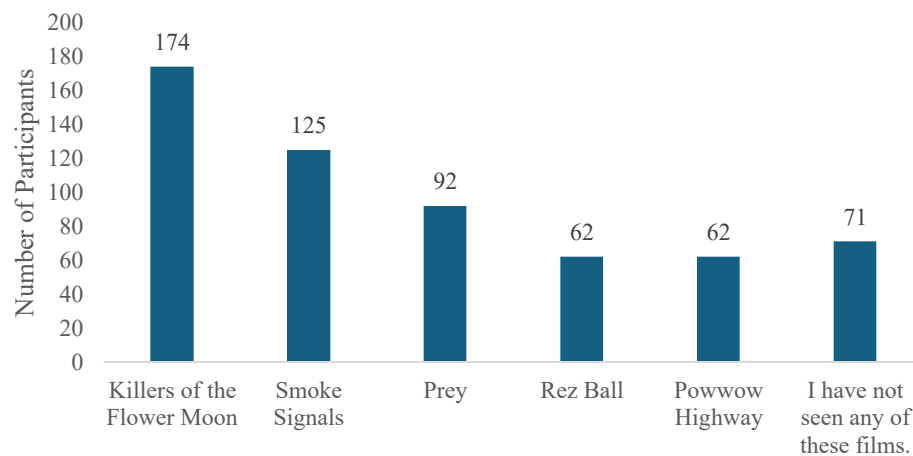
Note. Participants could select more than one category.

Because participants were allowed to select multiple responses, the data was analyzed as a multiple-response set, and percentages reflect the proportion of participants who reported having watched each show rather than mutually exclusive categories. As shown in Figure 6, *Reservation Dogs* was the most widely viewed program, with 66.7% of participants indicating they had watched it. This was followed by *Dark Winds* at 35.7%, while fewer participants reported watching *Rutherford Falls* (20.5%) and *North of North* (19.5%). Notably, 26.3% of participants indicated that they had not seen any of the listed shows. A chi-square test of independence determined the relationship between participant identity (Native vs. non-Native) and whether they had watched *Reservation Dogs*. Results indicated a significant association between these variables ($p < .001$). Native participants (84.6%) were substantially more likely to report having watched *Reservation Dogs* compared to non-Native participants (52.7%). *Dark Winds* also reported higher viewership from Native participants (44.6%) than non-Native participants (28.7%). Although *Rutherford Falls* and *North of North* showed lower overall viewership rates, 20.5% and 19.5%, respectively, Native participants remained more likely to report

having seen these programs as well. Overall, Native participants were consistently more likely to report viewing television programs featuring Native American characters.

Figure 7

Have you watched any of the following films that feature Native American characters?



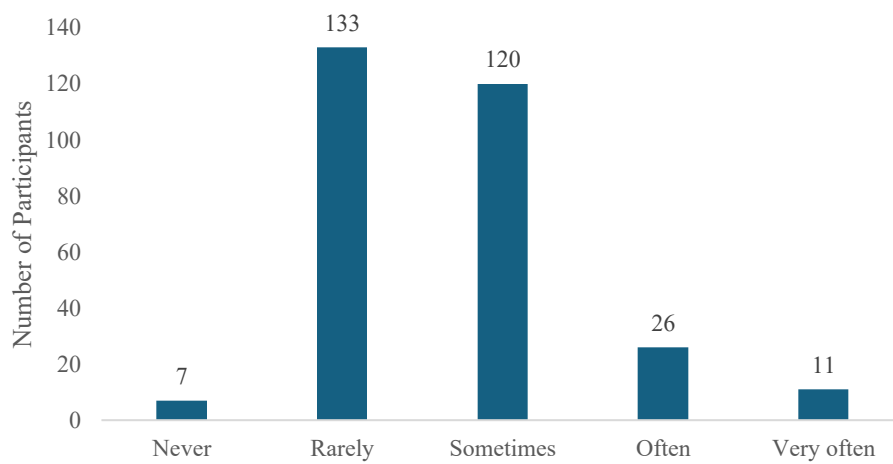
Note. Participants could select more than one category.

Participants reported varying levels of exposure to films featuring Native American characters. The most widely viewed film was *Killers of the Flower Moon* (58.6%), followed by *Smoke Signals* (42.1%) and *Prey* (31%). Fewer participants reported viewing *Rez Ball* (20.9%) and *Powwow Highway* (20.9%). Notably, 23.9% of participants indicated that they had not seen any of the listed films. A chi-square test of independence determined the relationship between Native and non-Native participants in their exposure to these films. Across all films, Native participants were significantly more likely to report having seen the films compared to non-Native participants, with all differences reaching statistical significance. The largest disparity was observed for *Smoke Signals*, where 69.2% of Native participants reported having seen the film compared to

only 21% of non-Native participants, $\chi^2 (1) = 69.88, p < .001$. Similar patterns were found for *Powwow Highway* (36.2% vs. 9%), $\chi^2 (1) = 32.67, p < .001$, and *Prey* (45.4% vs. 19.8%), $\chi^2 (1) = 22.45, p < .001$. *Killers of the Flower Moon* also showed a significant difference between groups, but the gap was smaller (69.2% vs. 50.3%), $\chi^2 (1) = 10.80, p = .001$. Overall, Native participants were consistently more likely to report viewing films featuring Native American characters.

Figure 8

How often do you encounter Native American characters in the media you consume?



The next question gauged how often viewers encountered Native American characters in the media they consume. Most participants indicated relatively low to moderate levels of exposure. 44.8% reported rarely and 40.4% answered sometimes. Smaller numbers of participants reported encountering Native characters often (8.8%) or very often (3.7%). Only 2.4% reported never seeing Native characters.

Figure 9

Overall, how would you rate the quality of Native American representation in contemporary film and television?

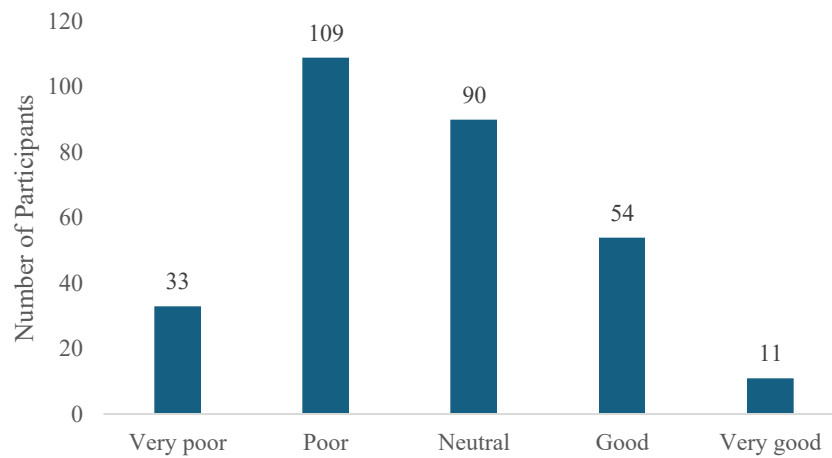


Figure 9 presents participants' general evaluation of the quality of Native American representation in contemporary film and television. The largest number of participants, 36.7%, rated representation as poor. 30.3% responded rated representation as neutral. Smaller portions rated representation as good (18.2%), very poor (11.1%), and very good (3.7%). Overall, the distribution indicates that participants' perceptions of Native American representation tend to be neutral to negative, with less respondents' rating representation as high quality.

Figure 10

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Native American characters are portrayed as complex individuals rather than stereotypes.

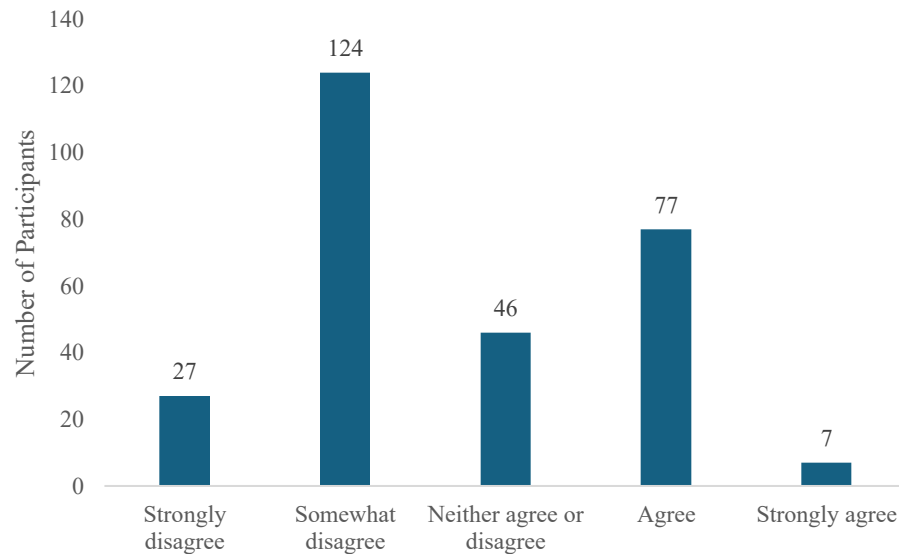


Figure 10 presents participants' ($n = 281$) level of agreement with the statement that Native American characters are portrayed as complex individuals rather than stereotypes. The largest number of respondents reported somewhat disagreeing (44.1%), followed by agree (27.4%). 16.4% of participants neither agree nor disagree. 9.6% of respondents strongly disagreed and 2.5% strongly agreed. Overall, responses indicate that participants tend to disagree that Native American characters are portrayed as complex individuals, suggesting a perception that such portrayals remain limited or stereotypical.

Figure 11

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Native American characters are shown as part of modern society, not only the past.

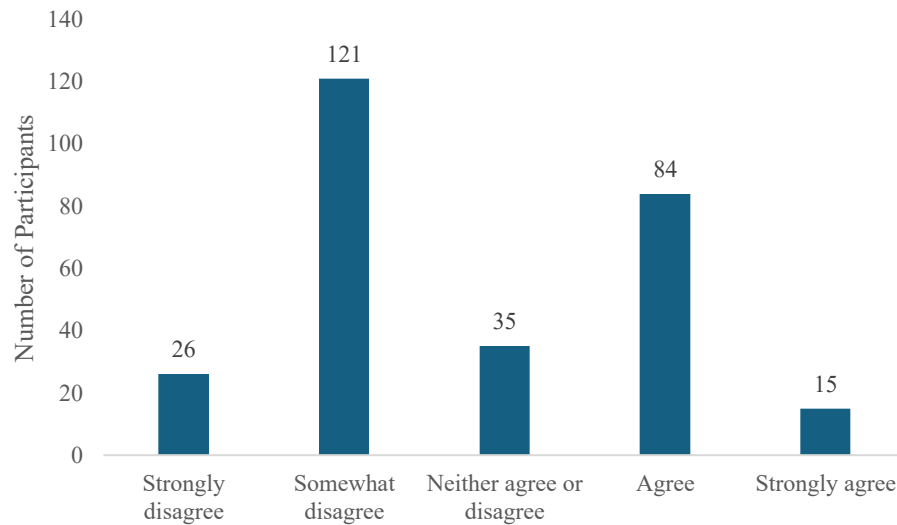


Figure 11 presents participants' ($n = 281$) level of agreement with the statement that Native American characters are shown as part of modern society rather than only the past. The largest number of participants reported somewhat disagreeing (43%), followed by agree (29.9%). 12.5% stated they neither agree nor disagree. 9.6% strongly disagreed and 5% strongly agreed. Overall, responses indicate a tendency toward disagreement, but results are varied.

Figure 12

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Native American cultures are represented with respect and care.

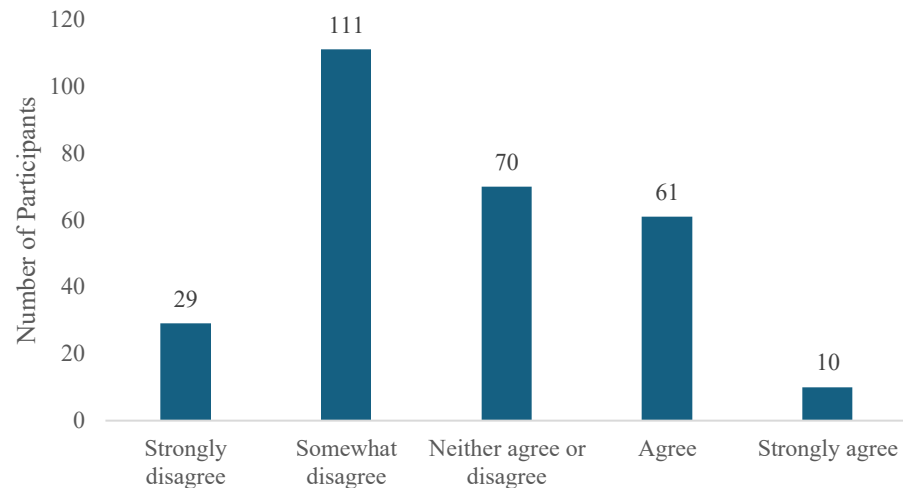


Figure 12 presents participants' (n = 281) level of agreement with the statement that Native American cultures are represented with respect and care. 39.5% of participants answered somewhat disagree, followed by 25% stating they neither agree nor disagree. 21.7% of participants reported they agree, and fewer respondents strongly disagreed at 10.3% or strongly agreed at 3.6%. Overall, responses indicate a tendency toward disagreement, but results are varied.

Figure 13

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Native characters are central to the story, not just supporting roles.

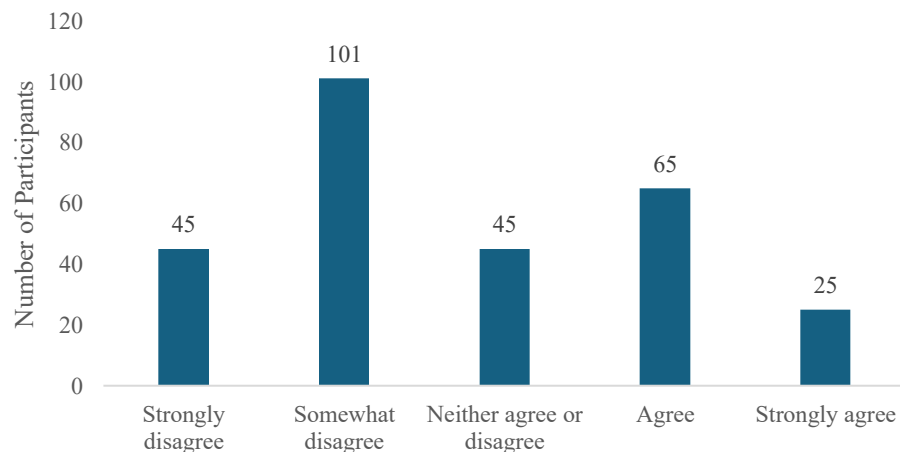


Figure 13 presents participants' ($n = 281$) level of agreement with the statement that Native American characters are central to the story rather than limited to supporting roles. The largest number of respondents reported somewhat disagreeing at 36%. An equal number of participants selected neither agree or disagree (16%) and strongly disagree (16%). A smaller percentage of respondents strongly agreed (8.9%). Overall, responses indicate a tendency toward disagreement, suggesting that participants perceive Native American characters as more often occupying supporting roles.

Figure 14

When watching media that features Native characters, how realistic do these portrayals feel to you?

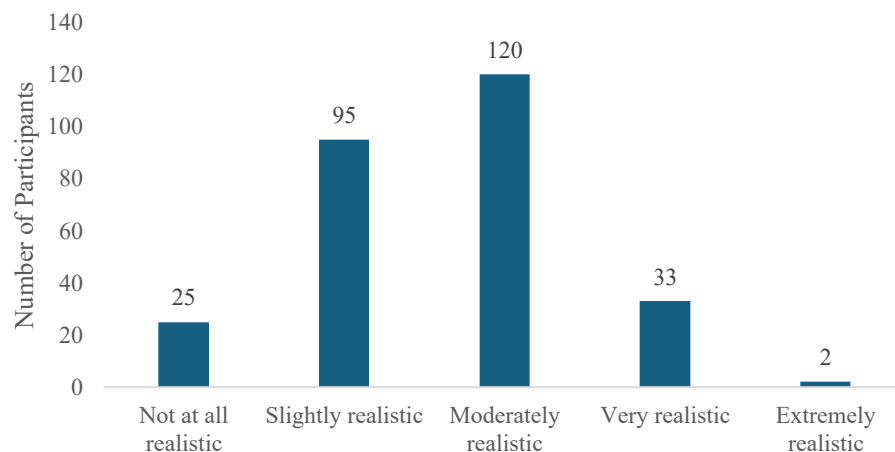


Figure 14 presents participants' ($n = 275$) perceptions of how realistic portrayals of Native American characters are in media. The largest portion of respondents rated portrayals as moderately realistic (43.6%). 34.5% believed these portrayals to be slightly realistic, followed by 12% reporting very realistic. 9.1% selected not at all realistic and 0.7% answered extremely realistic. Overall, responses suggest that participants tend to

view portrayals of Native American characters as moderately realistic, with relatively few respondents perceiving these portrayals as highly realistic.

Figure 15

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? The dialogue spoken by Native characters feels natural and believable.

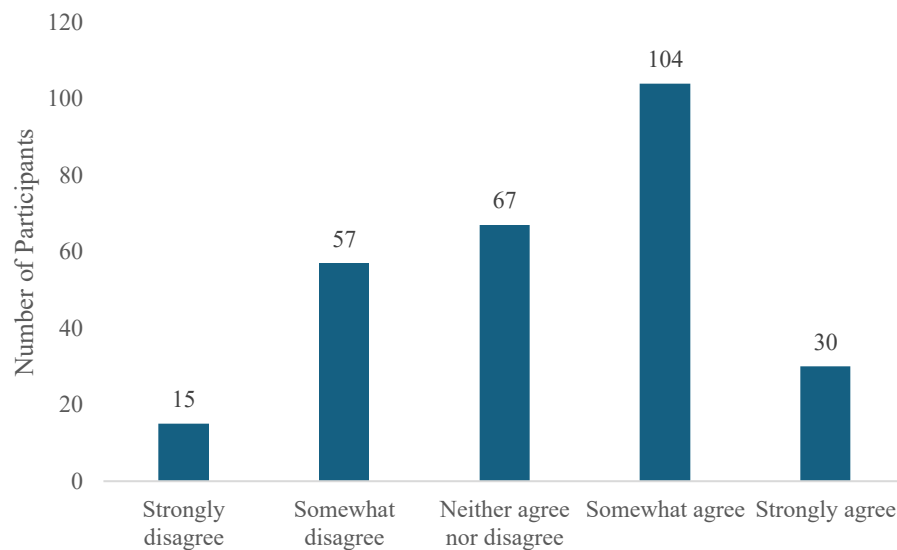


Figure 15 presents participants' ($n = 273$) level of agreement with the statement that the dialogue spoken by Native American characters feels natural and believable. The largest number of respondents reported somewhat agreeing (38.1%), followed by neither agree nor disagree (24.5%). 20.9% of participants selected somewhat disagree and 11.01% of respondents strongly agreed. 5.5% selected strongly disagree. Overall, responses suggest a more mixed distribution with a slight tendency toward agreement that dialogue is natural and believable.

Figure 16

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Native American communities are portrayed in ways that feel authentic.

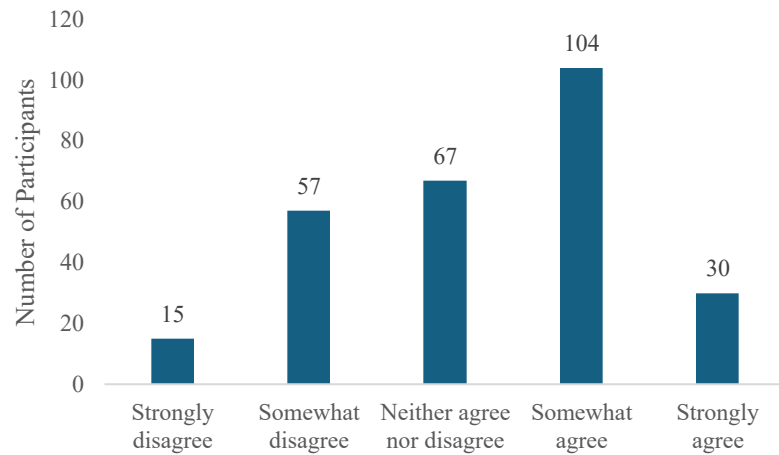


Figure 16 presents participants' (n = 273) level of agreement with the statement that Native American communities are portrayed in ways that feel authentic. The largest number of respondents reported somewhat agreeing at 38%. 20.9% somewhat disagree that portrayals feel authentic, while 11% strongly agreed, and 5.5% strongly disagreed. Overall, responses indicate a mixed distribution with a slight tendency toward agreement, suggesting that participants perceive portrayals of Native American communities as somewhat authentic, though not consistently so.

Figure 17

How important is it for Native American stories to be written or directed by Native Americans?

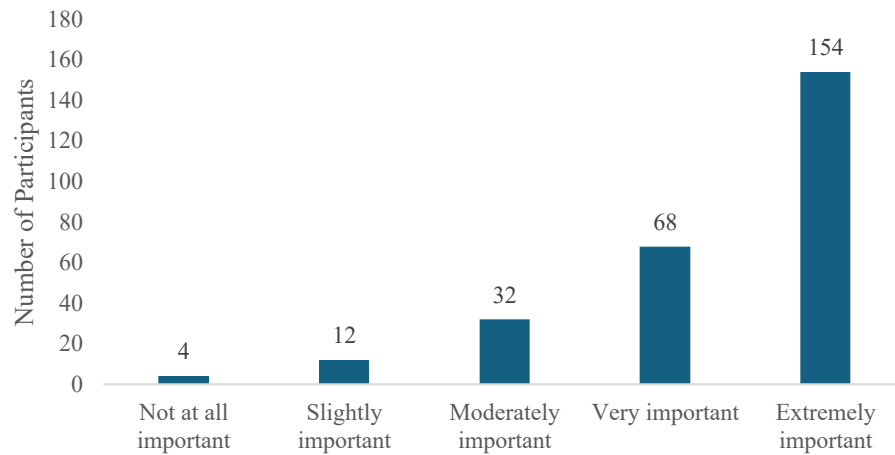


Figure 17 presents participants' (n = 270) perceptions of the importance of Native American stories being written or directed by Native Americans. Most respondents rated this as extremely important (57%), followed by very important (25.2%). Fewer participants selected moderately important (11.9%) and slightly important (4.4%). Very few respondents indicated that it *was* not at all important (1.5%). Overall, responses indicate a strong consensus that Native American involvement in the creation of their stories is highly important.

Figure 18

Overall, do you believe Native American representation in media is improving, staying the same, or worsening?

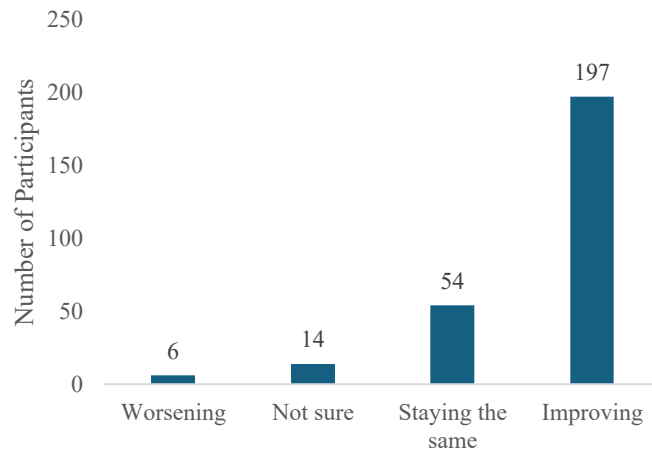


Figure 18 presents participants' (n = 271) perceptions of whether Native American representation in media is improving, staying the same, or worsening (n = 271). Most of respondents indicated that representation is improving at 72.7%. 19.9% reported that representation is staying the same. Relatively few participants believed it is worsening (2.2%) and 5.2% were unsure. Overall, responses indicate that most participants perceive Native American representation in media as improving over time.

Collectively, data set 2 illustrates a consistent pattern in participant perceptions of Native American representation in media. Despite respondents reporting moderate levels of exposure to Native American characters, their evaluations of representation were generally neutral to negative. Participants indicated that Native characters are often portrayed as lacking complexity, are not frequently depicted as part of modern society, and are not consistently represented with respect and care. Additionally, respondents suggested that Native characters are more likely to appear in supporting rather than central roles within narratives. Despite these concerns, perceptions of realism and authenticity were more mixed. At the same time, there was a strong consensus regarding the importance of Native American involvement in storytelling, with most participants

indicating that it is highly important for Native stories to be written or directed by Native creators.

Although participants expressed concerns about the quality and nature of Native American representation, a majority reported that they believe Native American representation in media is improving over time. Overall, these findings suggest that audiences perceive meaningful progress in representation while identifying current limitations inhibiting that progress.

Discussion

Data set 1 participants' experience in the film industry demonstrated the importance of industry support in platforming Native American talent and stories. The opinions participants discussed are consistent with previous research stating the importance of Native Americans in film, television, and streaming content (Giaccardi et al., 2024). Previous research demonstrates media is a powerful force. It can determine the worldview of general audiences (Hall, 2021). It can also decide who is included and who is not (Hall, 2021). This marginalization via omission, or symbolic annihilation, often occurs when specific minorities are absent, which reinforces the idea of these groups being lesser than others (Hall, 2021). Given the media's power to promote ideas within society, negative or positive, the question becomes not only who is included but how they are included.

Findings from data set 2 reinforce these concerns. Despite moderate exposure to Native American characters in media, their evaluations of representation were largely neutral to negative. A persistent pattern appeared in which Native American representation remains limited in nuance, scope, and narrative importance. In contrast to

these concerns, perceptions of realism and authenticity were more mixed. Participants tended to view portrayals as moderately realistic. Native American dialogue and community were also perceived as somewhat natural and believable. However, these more favorable perceptions did not outweigh broader concerns regarding stereotyping and limited casting. While media portrayals may achieve a degree of surface-level realism, they often fail to capture the full complexity and lived experience of Native American communities.

Overall, respondents were familiar with recent mainstream productions that feature Native American characters. A majority of respondents reported watching *Reservation Dogs* and over half had viewed *Killers of the Flower Moon*. This may reflect increased visibility of Native American stories in television shows, streaming platforms and theatrical releases. The critical and audience success of productions such as *Reservation Dogs* and *Killers of the Flower Moon* suggests general audiences, Native and non-Native, are watching productions with greater Indigenous involvement. These findings are in line with Giaccardi et al.'s (2024) report which found that television series with more Native American crew and characters have better audience reception. This increase in content has the potential to challenge historical misrepresentation and invisibility in film and television.

The issue of stereotyping and misrepresentation is still a relevant one according to respondents. Although Native representation has progressed in recent years, participants' responses suggested stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals remain an issue. Respondents generally disagreed that Native characters are portrayed as complex individuals, shown as part of modern society, represented with respect and care, or shown to be central to the

story. These findings are significant because they demonstrate that audiences continue to recognize the longstanding influence stereotypes have had on Native American representation in media. One possible explanation for these findings is the endurance of stereotypes introduced in popular culture. For much of the twentieth century, Native characters were frequently represented as default antagonists, violent or noble savages, and relics of the past. These recurring portrayals often ignored the diversity of Native American tribes and reinforced the misconception that Natives exist primarily within a historical context. The responses shown in Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13 suggest that many participants are aware of these historical patterns and recognize the nuance Native characters are often denied.

Perceptions of realism and authenticity were somewhat more favorable in later survey questions. In Figures 14-16, participants generally rated portrayals as moderately realistic and expressed slight agreement that Native dialogue and communities are portrayed in believable and authentic ways. These findings may reflect the influence of recent mainstream productions that have prioritized cultural accuracy and Indigenous involvement. However, these positive responses to questions of realism, authenticity, and accuracy do not negate broader concerns regarding the quality of representation.

One of the strongest findings emerged from Figure 17, where respondents overwhelmingly indicated that it is important for Native American stories to be written or directed by Native Americans. This finding strongly suggests audiences are not only receptive, but supportive of narrative sovereignty in the media they consume. Participants appear to recognize authentic representation hinges on who appears on the screen and how they appear, as well as who is responsible for writing the story being told.

Despite ongoing concerns with stereotypes and casting, most respondents indicated that Native American representation is improving. Together, Figures 13 through 18 illustrate a nuanced perspective in which respondents recognize that progress has been made, but there are still issues that must be addressed. Native American representation is a fluid and ever-evolving phenomenon. Though representation has undoubtedly increased in number and quality, there is still more progress to be made in the way characters and stories are created and the way casting and hiring choices are made.

Though audiences are receptive to these stories, this demand has not necessarily converted into industry access. According to interview participants, there are many structural issues within the entertainment industry that limit access to the networking and resources needed to gain opportunities. Once those needs are met, there are additional hurdles to jump. Several interview participants cited the industry's assumption that Native American stories lack commercial appeal. This assumption the audience for Native stories is not big enough places a barrier between burgeoning creatives and funding before their projects are even considered. It is also antithetical to audience and critical reception to productions such as *Reservation Dogs* and *Dark Winds*.

One of the most prominent forms of gatekeeping participants mentioned was access to funding. One participant noted it often requires a recognizable non-Native actor attached to a film to secure studio support, which contributes to the issue of Native characters not being central to the story. Another salient theme was the deficit between talent and opportunity. Interview participants repeatedly emphasized lack of Native talent was not an issue, but access to networking and institutional opportunities is. Interviewees highlighted the need for stronger professional connections, mentorship opportunities,

education programs, and long-term career support for Native filmmakers. Together, these interviews indicate representation operates beyond visibility. It is also dependent on the institutions deciding which stories are funded, produced, and distributed.

One approach the entertainment industry has adopted to address these concerns in cultural consultation, which offers an avenue toward more accurate and respectful portrayals of other cultures. In interviews with Native American professionals working in the entertainment industry, cultural consultation is frequently mentioned as a solution to misrepresentation. However, participant responses suggest that authenticity is more complex and negotiated in practice. P2 illustrated this tension through an anecdote about *Dances with Wolves* (1990), recalling that at a premiere she attended, Lakota audience members questioned Kevin Costner's speech, asking, "why is he talking like a woman?" Doris Leader Charge (Lakota), who served as the film's primary translator and language consultant, played a significant role in shaping the film's use of the Lakota language (Giago, 2012). She served as the primary translator, dialogue coach, and language expert for *Dances with Wolves*. Her work on the film was vigorous. She translated the script in three weeks and coached actors in Lakota dialogue (Giago, 2012). Her involvement represents a critical moment of Indigenous participation within a major Hollywood production.

However, debates surrounding the film's use of gendered Lakota speech complicate its legacy (Skye, 2009). In an interview with Russell Means, he similarly recalled that Lakota viewers found parts of the dialogue inaccurate, noting that some characters were speaking in a feminine dialect, which prompted laughter among Lakota audiences (Skye, 2009). This example demonstrates that consultation alone does not

guarantee authenticity. Instead, authenticity is determined by how cultures are portrayed by performance and narrative context. Even in a film widely regarded as groundbreaking for its involvement of Lakota and other Native American talent, there are limits to Hollywood's ability to fully capture the specificity of the Native American experience.

This example illustrates that authenticity cannot be reduced to the presence of cultural consultants or Native American participation alone. Instead, authenticity is a fluid process by which Indigenous storytelling is translated within a medium that is still largely influenced by Western storytelling conventions. As another participant suggested, the issue persists even before a production decides to include Native Americans in their stories. It is embedded in the very creation of these stories, and whether these characters are afforded full humanity. Therefore, the problem lies at the level of the narrative structure itself.

Historically, Native American portrayals in film and television have largely excluded Native American voices, but recent industry practices suggest a growing trend toward progress. Notably, survey respondents indicated that they believe Native American representation is improving over time, despite ongoing concerns regarding quality and authenticity. One example is Marvel's "Echo," which partnered with the Choctaw Nation to ensure authenticity in language, costuming, and storytelling (Kirven, 2023). This partnership represents an important step toward Indigenous media sovereignty, which emphasizes the importance of Native American participation in Native American stories, extending beyond visuals and into the creative and collaborative realm.

The involvement of the Choctaw Nation in Marvel's "Echo" directly addresses the challenges cultural consultants face within the entertainment industry. As a participant in data set 1 noted, consultants are often expected to carry the burden of ensuring utmost authenticity while establishing their necessity on set. Fully collaborative efforts where tribes are engaged as partners rather than advisors begin to redistribute that responsibility and authority. Importantly, these partnerships illustrate how representation is evolving beyond the inclusion of the occasional mainstream character or story, but toward inclusion in participating in the entertainment industry itself. Where earlier media relied on non-Native interpretations of the Native American experience, contemporary projects increasingly recognize Native communities as knowledge holders and essential contributors.

Orbe's (1998) co-cultural theory examines how members of marginalized groups communicate with larger dominant societal structures. Native Americans working in the entertainment industry described ongoing efforts to challenge stereotypical portrayals and expand opportunities for authentic storytelling. Orbe characterized experiences like these as co-cultural communication strategies. Specifically, strategies in which marginalized groups promote effective interaction with dominant group members without necessarily internalizing the images society places on them (Orbe, 1998). Participants' emphasis on writing and directing Native American stories demonstrates a commitment to rewriting dominant narratives from within the entertainment industry. Through this negotiation, Native Americans continue to challenge and reconstruct representations mainstream media has historically defined.

When I began this research, I entered with a recent and rigorous interest in Native American representation in media. Prior to conducting the interviews, I anticipated discussions would focus a large part on historical stereotypes, persistent inaccurate portrayals, and invisibility in mainstream media. These concerns did appear, but participants also emphasized persistent industry barriers to an extent I had not anticipated. While there is research acknowledging the lack of BIPOC and Native American representation characters, writers, and directors—participants went deeper, acknowledging the lack of representation in administrative roles such as talent management and casting. Even lack of representation in movie critiquing was mentioned. Though this research focuses primarily on Native American involvement as writers and directors, there is a gap in research regarding the deficit in many crucial roles in the entertainment industry to be expanded upon.

The interviews broadened my understanding of representation beyond questions of who appears on screen, in the director's chair, or in the writer's room. Before these decisions behind a project are greenlight, there is a mountain of gatekeeping to climb. Native Americans are at a unique disadvantage at almost complete invisibility in the media. One participant poignantly provided the nexus of this disparity stating, "people don't see Indians as humans." Though there are other disparities to address in media-making, such as a lack of access to education and resources, industry gatekeeping, and lack of trust in Native American stories to perform financially, this central idea lies at the heart of this research. When harmful ideas about a marginalized group are repeated over generations, it becomes a naturalized, requiring a complex and ongoing process to resist it. Therefore, representation lies as a cultural responsibility beyond more than just

creative roles, but in casting offices, production offices, studios, and more. This could potentially ease the burden cultural consultants can bear as the designated Native American cultural authority working across several different departments.

The duties of cultural consultants also expanded my assumptions of what the role required to provide productions the guidance they need to create an accurate picture. I was particularly surprised to learn the amount of negotiating it required, as well as the demands of the role. Oftentimes consultants are spread across different departments—Hair, makeup, wardrobe, writing, art department and more, to ensure historical and cultural accuracy. As one participant noted, working cross-departmentally and coordinating the hiring of outside talent is more in line with producer work. In this sense, I gained more understanding of the vast demands and challenges cultural consultants are faced with on set.

The survey findings also challenged some of my assumptions of how audiences felt about Native American representation. When beginning this research, I expected more criticism from audiences. Although respondents identified ongoing concerns regarding stereotypes and underrepresentation, many also acknowledged recent improvements in Native representation. This combination of cautious optimism and continued criticism suggests a more nuanced public perception than I initially anticipated. Together, the interviews and survey responses shed light on the progress and challenges coexisting within Native American representation. I entered this project interested in how Native Americans are portrayed on screen, but I leave it recognizing representation is heavily influenced by who has the privilege to participate in the institutions that determine whose stories are told. The research demonstrates that meaningful

representation is not as simple as an issue of inclusion, but one of sovereignty, accountability, and access.

Limitations

This study used a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. Though the qualitative interviews provided in-depth understanding of the phenomena, it did have limitations. The sample size for data set 1 was limited to nine participants, mostly located in Oklahoma, meaning the findings are unrepresentative of all Native American tribes. When a qualitative study does have a somewhat larger population, conducting and analyzing data collection requires more time and resources. Additionally, collecting and analyzing qualitative data is also time consuming. This is due to the generally elusive nature of conducting and analyzing qualitative research (Richards & Richards, 2014). Finally, qualitative results cannot be generalized due to the utilization of non-probability sampling and the specificity to individual experiences (Rahman, 2016). Though the qualitative results provide deep insight into lived experience, it is limited by nonprobability sampling, as well as complicated coding and analysis.

While my positionality as a citizen of the Cherokee Nation citizen and a Native American provided important cultural context and access to participants, it does introduce potential biases in interpretation. I acknowledge my insider perspective bears personal socio-demographic characteristics as well as assumptions, biases, beliefs, and expectations (Druzenko, 2014). Scholars have demonstrated awareness that knowledge created by insider researchers may be different from knowledge created by outsider researchers (Druzenko, 2014). It is important to note this insider positionality may also

influence the interview dynamic, as participants might share more than they might otherwise with a researcher who they sense might “get it.” (Druzenko, 2014).

In this sense, my role as a community member and scholar may have influenced what participants felt comfortable sharing (Druzenko, 2014). Though I employed inductive thematic analysis to minimize interpretive bias, the analysis and interpretation of data cannot be fully extricated from my positionality as a researcher (Druzenko, 2014). Future research could address this limitation by incorporating collaborative coding with additional Native American researchers or peer review. These nuances demonstrate the complexity of qualitative research, as well as the unique methodological challenges and opportunities of insider research.

In contrast, quantitative data has many advantages, such as being less time consuming, more generalizable, and more reliable (Carr, 1994). Although quantitative research can yield results that are easier to generalize, the method does not develop meaning, therefore lacking a deeper understanding of the results that are obtained (Rahman, 2016). Another weakness of quantitative research is it does determine the “what” of a research problem, but it tends to not answer the “how” of a research problem. Quantitative research cannot account for how reality is shaped, maintained, or interpreted (Blaikie, 2007). Because quantitative research is highly systematic and controlled, it tends to be highly objective (Rahman, 2016). Essentially, quantitative research lacks connection between the researcher and the participant.

Another limitation of this study’s quantitative research was the use of convenience sampling, which limits the ability to generalize of the findings to the broader population. The survey yielded a disproportionately high number of Native American

respondents (43.8%) relative to their proportion of the U.S. population (2.9%) as reported in the 2020 U.S. Census (Jones et al., 2021). This outcome was likely influenced by the study's recruitment strategy, which relied heavily on social media distribution. Because social media algorithms can increase the visibility of content among users with shared interests and social groups, the survey may have been shown more frequently to individuals with an existing interest in Native American issues and media representation. As a result, the sample does not fully reflect the perspectives of the general population, and the findings should be interpreted with this consideration in mind. While this limits the representativeness of the sample, the larger number of Native American respondents also provided valuable insight from a population directly affected by Native American media representation.

For future research in this field, it should be noted that some of the richest data obtained in this study was acquired from the interviews in data set 1. It is highly advantageous for researchers to take a qualitative approach when studying Native American representation in media. Not only does it bolster Indigenous research by centering Indigenous perspectives, but the qualitative data can also provide even richer detail about how Native Americans navigate an evolving entertainment industry.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the perspectives of Native Americans working within the entertainment industry. It also sought to examine audience perceptions of Native American representation in contemporary film, television, and streaming content. The findings reveal audiences continue to identify significant concerns regarding representation. Despite reporting relatively frequent media consumption and moderate

exposure to Native American characters, survey respondents often reported neutral to negative perceptions of this representation. Respondents commonly viewed Native characters as lacking complexity, being confined to supporting roles, and appearing more frequently in historical rather than contemporary settings. It is also important to note participants perceived some portrayals as moderately realistic and viewed dialogue and community depictions more favorably. These findings suggest that while the number of Native American images and stories in the media may be progressing, deeper structural issues surrounding representation remain unresolved. Through, the findings in both data sets demonstrated that Native American representation continues to progress from nearly a century of historical misrepresentation and erasure.

A key part of that progress emphasized by interviewees is Native American participation as writers, directors, and actors. Participants working in entertainment consistently discussed the need for Native American creatives to have the agency to craft their own narratives. Additionally, participants noted several roadblocks barring burgeoning talent from succeeding in the entertainment industry, with several reporting a lack of resources and opportunity. Their perspectives reinforce broader scholarship surrounding Indigenous media sovereignty which argue that authentic representation extends beyond visibility alone and requires tangible creative agency and access. Examples such as “Echo” demonstrate how collaborative partnerships between entertainment giants and Native American communities can craft original stories to captivate audiences. This can be successfully achieved, even while promoting respectful and culturally sensitive portrayals.

Overall, this research demonstrates that Native American representation in media exists within a transitional moment. This is not unlike the past, when Native American representation seemingly appeared to “trend.” Despite this pattern of the demand of Native American images and stories ebbing and flowing, today is arguably different. Audiences are more likely to recognize meaningful progress. They also remain aware of the persistence of stereotypes, misrepresentation, and erasure. The findings suggest that future progress in representation will depend not solely on the quantity and quality of Native American characters, but also on the continued ushering of Native American talent within the entertainment industry.

In the future, research could further study how Native audiences specifically interpret contemporary representation, as well as how productions with Native American representation influence audience perceptions over time. As Indigenous creators continue to gain momentum within the entertainment industry, opportunities abound for media to move beyond stereotypes and toward a more equitable future. Looking forward, the future of Native American filmmaking lies in expanding what is represented and where that representation occurs. This means moving beyond the occasional breakthrough film or television series and funding more projects. This includes shorts, independent features, genre films, children’s programming, animation, and more. When Native American filmmakers claim contemporary genres such as horror, science fiction, romantic comedy or superhero films, they challenge the expectation that Indigenous people only belong in historical dramas or documentaries.

Native American filmmakers are no longer limited to theatrical releases or cable television. Native American media activism increasingly uses digital tools, like YouTube,

blogs, social media and streaming platforms to resist Hollywood's imagery and achieve media sovereignty. Indigenous video activism, podcasts, and Native fashion and culture blogs all inject the work of self-representation into mainstream culture. In the future, Native American filmmakers can continue reaching general audiences from mainstream platforms, social media in particular, which provides Native people with a medium through which they can accurately represent themselves. Because digital media is more accessible, their distribution is less problematic than the one of traditional media (Sonza, 2018).

However, recent industry data does show that visibility alone is not enough. One of the pitfalls which must be avoided is the building of a politics of recognition through media visibility (Sonza, 2018). Even though the use of the media is also a way to raise awareness among general audiences, self-representation should not be "fixed by the look of another" (Sonza, 2018, p. 13). The use of cinema, television, or other media should, however, constantly negotiate the difficult task of trying to convince the very structures oppressing Native Americans of their authenticity and of the legitimacy of their claims (Sonza, 2018). The future of Native American filmmaking therefore involves claiming more than visual space. It also requires decision-making power in studios and streaming companies, as well as advocating for film funds and training programs for Native Americans.

The evolution of Native American representation demonstrates the media we consume is a multifaceted process that can marginalize and liberate groups of people. According to the results analyzed, this research determines representation is an important factor in influencing audiences' perceptions of Native Americans. Though past portrayals

in media are in part to blame for the proliferation of harmful stereotypes, these same mediums can be leveraged to normalize Native Americans in everyday life. Of course, this work is never complete. Cultural identity is fluid, and there will always be tension between how a culture is portrayed in comparison to how members of that culture truly operate. Nevertheless, this research provides a critical discussion of the history, challenges, and possibilities of Native American representation in media.

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