

# The *Black Panther* Phenomenon: A Scoping Review on Global Audience Reception

Berit Sandberg

University of Applied Sciences Berlin, HTW Business School, Treskowallee, Berlin, Germany.

E-Mail: [berit.sandberg@htw-berlin.de](mailto:berit.sandberg@htw-berlin.de)

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## ABSTRACT

*The film Black Panther (2018) became a cultural landmark due to its groundbreaking portrayal of Black excellence, Afrofuturist aesthetics, and its significance as a milestone for Black representation in mainstream Hollywood cinema. This scoping review analyzes the global reception of Black Panther by synthesizing findings from 13 empirical studies, primarily conducted in the United States and South Africa. The review highlights recurring themes of empowerment, cultural pride, and the affirmation of Black identity, particularly among Black audiences. While viewers across different regions praised Black Panther for its positive representation of Blackness, responses varied depending on socio-cultural context. Western audiences largely framed the film within the discourse of Hollywood diversity and representation, whereas audiences in the Global South interpreted it through colonial and cultural lenses. Although the film challenges stereotypical portrayals of Africa, its impact on fostering intercultural understanding remains uncertain. This study emphasizes the need for cross-cultural and intersectional research to explore the complexities of audience engagement with Black Panther and similar films.*

**Keywords:** Africa, audience research, Blackness, Black identity, film, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Wakanda

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *Black Panther's Cinematic Impact and Cultural Significance*

In 2018, the Walt Disney Company released the first film in its Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) that focused on a Black superhero. The film *Black Panther* narrates the story of the newly crowned king of the secretive, technologically advanced African nation of Wakanda, which epitomizes a utopia untouched by colonialism. Under the direction of African American filmmaker Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* became a “boundary-breaking film” (Berman 2018). It features a predominantly Black cast and places Black professionals in key creative roles, thereby directly challenging the longstanding underrepresentation of Black talent in Hollywood (Erigha 2015).

*Black Panther* portrays Wakanda as a technologically advanced yet deeply traditional African nation, offering a compelling vision of Afrofuturism (Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Its depiction of Africa subverts colonial and neocolonial stereotypes that frame the continent as primitive, impoverished, and dependent on external aid (Ademolu 2018; Byrne 2023). Through production and costume design, hairstyling and makeup, as well as language and musical composition, the film incorporates a wide range of African cultural elements. Rituals and symbolism are similarly drawn from African heritage (Babayi *et al.* 2020; Li *et al.* 2020; Nata *et al.* 2020; Osei 2020; Ebrahim 2021; Ngubane 2022). With its depiction of Africanity suggesting cultural authenticity, *Black Panther* marks a counterpoint in Hollywood's perspective on Africa and its cultures (Bakari 2018; Sanders and Banjo 2022).

*Black Panther* remains the first—and to date, the only—MCU film to receive a nomination for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. The film garnered widespread critical acclaim, reflected in its Metascore of 88 on Metacritic (Metacritic, 2018). Critics commended both its entertainment value and its cultural significance

(Hornaday 2018), describing it as “a subversive and uproarious action-adventure, in which African stereotypes are upended” (Bradshaw 2018). While some scholars celebrated the film as “a prophetic reimagining of Africa” (Ademolu 2018), others offered more critical perspectives, arguing that its stylized, homogenized portrayal—despite its Pan-African ambitions—fails to adequately reflect the continent’s rich cultural diversity (Khan 2019; Asante and Pindi 2020).

*Black Panther* achieved unprecedented box office success. With record-breaking advance ticket sales and a highly successful opening weekend, the film grossed nearly \$1.35 billion globally, positioning it as the most successful solo superhero film to date (Bakari 2018; IMDb 2024). It holds the top spot in all-time box office revenue across South, West, and East Africa (The Walt Disney Company, 2018). Its cultural impact is further underscored by its digital footprint, which includes a total of over 35 million Tweets. As a result, *Black Panther* has become the most tweeted-about film in history (Easter 2018).

The film was met with enthusiasm by audiences, who lauded its presentation of an innovative “counternarrative of Blackness” (Sanders and Banjo 2022, 441; D’Agostino 2019). Scholars observed a “seismic reaction from black audiences around the globe ... experiencing mass psychic relief” (White 2018, 426). However, a racist backlash on user-generated platforms, social media, and far-right media outlets was also noted (Babcock *et al.* 2019; Varda and Hahner 2020; Reynolds 2023).

## 1.2 Research Rationale

Superhero films such as *Black Panther* exert considerable psychological and cultural influence, particularly among younger audiences (Marsad *et al.* 2023). Marketed as family-friendly entertainment with global reach, they can either reinforce or challenge dominant cultural narratives. Media representations play a critical role in shaping individual self-perception and broader societal attitudes (Mastro 2008; Dixon 2019; Ross 2019), influencing social norms, fostering inclusivity, and offering spaces for the negotiation of identity and culture (Sanders *et al.* 2021). Positive portrayals are widely believed to promote cross-cultural understanding, reduce prejudice, and facilitate intercultural dialogue (Bredella 2012; Sanders and Banjo 2022; Mastro *et al.* 2024). Empirical research on audience responses to film supports this view, demonstrating that cinematic representation can cultivate empathy, enhance intercultural awareness, and deepen understanding of cultural diversity (Tuncay 2014; Lee and Priester 2015; Glotov and Kotilainen 2021).

In the United States, *Black Panther* was widely embraced as a powerful commentary on representation and racial identity and was celebrated as a cultural milestone highlighting the significance of minority visibility in Hollywood (Lefait 2020). In contrast, Kenyan audiences valued the film for its positive reimagining of Africa and its strong emphasis on themes of self-determination and autonomy (Omanga and Mainye 2019).

*Black Panther’s* cultural significance, alongside the variability in its reception, raises important questions about the cross-cultural impact of its narratives and visual representations. The following research questions have guided the study: (1) How do audiences from different cultural contexts respond to *Black Panther*? (2) How do audience members interpret the film’s representations of race, culture, and identity? (3) How do viewers engage with stereotypical and counter-stereotypical imagery in the film, and to what extent does this engagement contribute to the cultivation of intercultural understanding?

To address these research questions, a scoping review was conducted to provide an overview of empirical studies on audience reception of *Black Panther*. Historically, audience reception research—which examines how viewers interpret and construct meaning from media texts—has largely overlooked Black-oriented media and Black audiences (Ross 2019). *Black Panther* represents a turning point in this regard, as it is the first film to inspire significant scholarly engagement with Black audience reception on a global scale.

In light of *Black Panther’s* significant impact on media studies and the diverse body of audience reception research—spanning various cultural contexts, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks—a scoping review was deemed appropriate to map and synthesize existing evidence. This approach enables the identification of research gaps and provides a foundation for future studies on audience reception of films that center Black identity, representation, and cultural narratives (Peters *et al.* 2020).

The review reveals that *Black Panther* was widely celebrated—especially among Black audiences—for its empowering representations and affirmation of Black identity. However, audience reception varied notably across cultural and regional contexts. While viewers in the Global North primarily interpreted the film through the lens of Hollywood’s diversity and inclusion discourse, audiences in the Global South engaged with it from historical and cultural perspectives, often critically examining its portrayal of Africa.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This scoping review follows the methodological framework outlined by Peters *et al.* (2020). It incorporates empirical studies on audience reactions to the film *Black Panther*. Articles were assessed for their inclusion of audience reception data based on self-reported interpretations and responses. The review examines structured audience reception studies utilizing methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of social media discussions. Studies focusing solely on viewer behavior were excluded, as they do not capture audience meaning-making and interpretive processes central to this review. Film reviews, personal narratives, individual blog posts, and informal user reviews from platforms such as IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, and Letterboxd were excluded due to their subjective nature and lack of methodological rigor. Broader discussions on media framing and political discourse were excluded because they did not reflect direct audience responses. Additionally, theoretical or conceptual papers without empirical audience data were excluded to maintain a focus on empirical evidence.

A systematic search for articles was conducted in the multidisciplinary electronic databases Academic Search Ultimate, Sabinet African Journals, Scopus, Social Sciences, and Web of Science. The Boolean phrase ("black panther" AND ( film OR movie ) AND ( audience\* OR view\* OR perception\* OR reception\* OR reaction\* OR engagement OR interpretation\* OR discourse ) ) was applied to titles and abstracts. The search was limited to journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings that were published between the release year of the film, 2018, and 2024.

In addition to the database search, relevant references were manually identified using Elicit (Ought, n.d.) and Google Scholar.

The search initially yielded 65 articles that were potentially relevant. Subsequently, titles and abstracts were screened for empirical evidence of audience responses to the film *Black Panther*, resulting in 22 articles for full-text screening. During full-text screening, articles were assessed for their inclusion of audience reception data. The screening process was conducted in two stages: first, a manual screening performed by the author, followed by an AI-assisted screening using SciSpace (2022), which is recommended as a complementary review tool due to its performance in article screening and data extraction (Barrot 2024; Jain *et al.* 2024). The screening prompts (see Appendix A) were developed based on the above-mentioned inclusion criteria and refined using ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024). The concordance for title and abstract screening was established at a rate of 93%, with all conflicting cases being submitted to full-text screening. The full-text screening yielded an 86% match. Conflicts were resolved by the author after another round of thorough reading. After the screening process, 13 articles remained for analysis. Search outcomes are displayed in Figure 1, using a standard PRISMA flow diagram (Page *et al.* 2021).

Data extraction was conducted using SciSpace (2022), while prompt engineering (see Appendix B) was facilitated by ChatGPT (OpenAI 2024). The results were verified for accuracy by the author and compiled into a summary table (Table 1). A qualitative thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted to identify and describe key themes emerging from the reviewed articles.

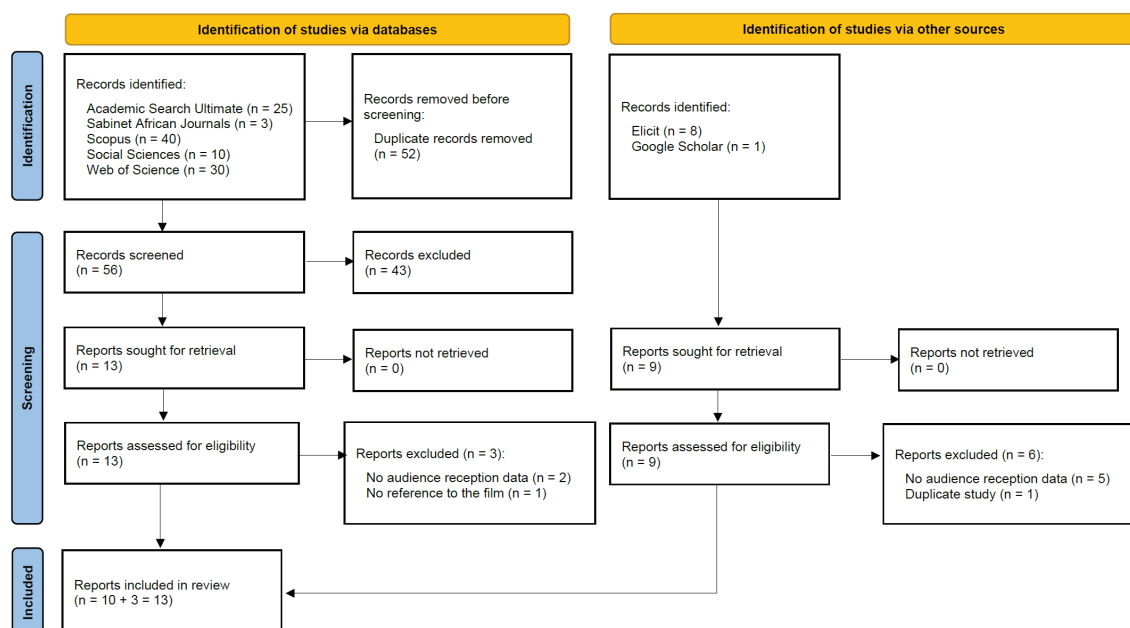


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram for literature search and selection (Note. n = number)

**Table 1: Data Extraction Matrix (Note. n = number)**

| Author(s)                                      | Sample                                                                                                        | Methods                                                                                  | Theoretical Framework            | Audience Reactions (Emotional Response/Response to Representation)                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Burocco <i>et al.</i> (2019)<br>Brazil         | n = ?<br>Predominantly Afro-Brazilian audience                                                                | Thematic analysis of user-generated content on social media                              | Afrofuturism                     | Positive responses, empowerment, excitement about representation<br>Celebration of black voices and bodies, pride in Black identity, acknowledgment of black heroism<br>Reinforcement of global power structures, Africa vs. diaspora rivalry, idealized portrayals of Black identity |
| Dogan (2021)<br>USA                            | n = 137<br>Black and/or African American audience aged 19–63                                                  | Qualitative online survey                                                                |                                  | Strong positive reactions, feelings of empowerment and pride in racial identity, desire for connectedness<br>Deep connection to the film's representation of Black culture, the significance of seeing Black characters in leading roles                                              |
| González-Velázquez <i>et al.</i> (2020)<br>USA | n = 124<br>American high school students aged 15–20 with diverse ethnic backgrounds                           | Pretest–posttest experimental study                                                      |                                  | Empowerment, increased well-being for Black/African American and Asian American youth<br>Positive influence of representation, inspiration for Black/African American youth, pride in Black identity                                                                                  |
| Hall (2022)<br>USA                             | n = 147<br>Average age 25 with diverse ethnic backgrounds                                                     | Quantitative online survey                                                               |                                  | Emotional connection to Black characters, particularly among African American viewers                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Hibbert and Piazza (2023)<br>South Africa      | South African English students (n = ?)<br>UK English students (n = 13)                                        | Qualitative content analysis of essays and follow-up focus group discussions             | Reception theory<br>Afrofuturism | Feelings of empowerment, strong emotional impact<br>South Africa, particularly people of color: empowerment, pride in Black identity<br>UK: critical view of cultural appropriation                                                                                                   |
| Iyer (2024)<br>South Africa                    | n = 32<br>South African students aged 22–28                                                                   | Qualitative content analysis of narratives                                               |                                  | Empowerment, empathy, and social cohesion<br>Recognition of African culture, acknowledgment of colonial impacts                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Makwambeni and Sibiyi (2022)<br>South Africa   | n = ?<br>Black South African Women aged 15–35                                                                 | Critical discourse analysis of focus group discussions and follow-up in-depth interviews | Afrofuturism                     | Empowerment, resistance, pleasure<br>Pride in Black identity, reclamation of voice, subversion of stereotypes                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Martin (2019)<br>USA                           | n = ?<br>US-based Black people aged 23–66                                                                     | In-depth interviews                                                                      |                                  | Feelings of communal pride, support of Black representation, and Afrocentrism<br>Black people as superheroes, the fitness of the Black Panther as a role model                                                                                                                        |
| McKay-Jackson <i>et al.</i> (2023)<br>USA      | n = 198<br>African, African American, Black Caribbean, Black/Other, or Multiracial viewers of African descent | Quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey data                                     | Critical Race Theory             | Empowerment (honor, hope, pride)<br>Appreciation for positive Black representation, pride of Black identity, counter-narratives, and critical consciousness                                                                                                                           |
| Sanders and Banjo (2022)<br>USA                | n = 366<br>U.S. viewers, average age 38, with diverse ethnic backgrounds                                      | Quantitative analysis of online survey data                                              |                                  | Higher perceived group vitality of African Americans                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Sewchurran (2022)<br>South Africa              | n = 13<br>South African Black viewers aged 18–25                                                              | Qualitative thematic analysis of focus group data                                        | Afrofuturism                     | Feelings of empowerment and pride, particularly in relation to the film's cultural significance and representation of Black identity<br>Strong recognition and appreciation for cultural elements, resonating with viewers' identity and heritage                                     |
| Sibiyi (2024)<br>South Africa                  | n = approx. 25<br>Young Black South African viewers                                                           | Thematic analysis of focus group and follow-up in-depth interview data                   | Reception theory<br>Afrofuturism | Feelings of empowerment and hope, particularly in relation to viewers' heritage and cultural identity<br>Strong sense of pride in Black identity, deep resonance of the film's use of African languages and cultural elements                                                         |
| Waghid and Ontong (2022)<br>South Africa       | n = 52<br>South African students                                                                              | Thematic analysis of focus group data                                                    | Afrofuturism                     | Empowerment is a strong emotional reaction to themes of African identity and representation.<br>Pride in Black Identity and African heritage, cultural openness, desire for authentic representation                                                                                  |

## RESULTS

### 2.1 Characteristics of Included Studies

The scoping review encompassed 13 studies examining audience reactions to *Black Panther*, conducted in South Africa (six), the United States (six), and Brazil (one). Published between 2019 and 2024, these studies reflect a sustained academic interest in the film following its 2018 release.

Three studies (Burocco 2019; Sewchurran 2022; Sibiya 2024) were explicitly designed as audience reception studies, and two studies were linked to reception theory (Hibbert and Piazza 2023; Sibiya 2024). One U.S. study was grounded in critical race theory (McKay-Jackson *et al.* 2023), while the vast majority of South African studies employed Afrofuturism as a comprehensive conceptual framework. In the remaining studies, no analytical frameworks were explicitly mentioned.

Two studies employed a comparative approach: one contrasted the reaction between Black and White audiences (Sanders and Banjo 2022), while another compared perspectives from participants in South Africa and the United Kingdom (Hibbert and Piazza 2023).

While most studies have focused exclusively on *Black Panther*, two have examined the film alongside other research objects (Martin 2019; Hall 2022). Six studies exclusively or predominantly engaged Black participants, including three based in the United States. One study focused on an all-female sample (Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022). A total of eight studies restricted their sample to young adults, with four of these studies specifically recruiting students.

The predominant research design across the sample was qualitative. The methodologies encompassed one experimental study (González-Velázquez *et al.* 2020), four survey-based studies (all from the United States), and one content analysis of user-generated content on social media (Burocco 2019). The majority of studies (seven) analyzed focus group, interview, or narrative/essay data, with focus groups (five studies) being the most frequently applied qualitative method.

### 2.2 Universal Themes

One of the most notable findings in the audience reception literature is the strong emotional engagement elicited by *Black Panther*, particularly among Black viewers. Audiences in the United States, across the African diaspora, and in South Africa frequently reported a profound sense of identification with the film, often interpreting it as a long-overdue affirmation of Black excellence (Burocco 2019; González-Velázquez *et al.* 2020; Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022). The film also appears to foster a heightened critical

consciousness, especially in relation to Black identity, cultural stereotypes, and dominant portrayals of Africa (Hibbert and Piazza 2023; McKay-Jackson *et al.* 2023; Waghid and Ontong 2022).

Across the studies included in this review, empowerment and pride in Black identity are consistently prevalent as major themes. Audiences expressed pride in their cultural heritage. Particularly in Black South African communities, the film was seen as a source of cultural pride and a challenge to stereotypical portrayals of Blackness (Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022; Hibbert and Piazza 2023; Sibiya 2024). Similarly, African American viewers reported feelings of empowerment, highlighting the film's capacity to affirm and validate their identities (González-Velázquez *et al.* 2020; Dogan *et al.* 2021; Sanders and Banjo 2022; Sewchurran 2022; Waghid and Ontong 2022; McKay-Jackson *et al.* 2023). The film is widely recognized for its role in strengthening Black identity, offering audiences positive, aspirational role models that contrast with historically stereotypical representations (Martin 2019; Sewchurran 2022).

### 2.3 Socio-demographic Perspectives

Black American viewers overwhelmingly identify with *Black Panther*, regarding it as a rare and affirming representation of Black identity within mainstream Hollywood. The film reinforces pride and self-worth, fostering a strong sense of racial pride and collective identity and reinforcing feelings of resilience against racial discrimination (Sanders and Banjo 2022; McKay-Jackson *et al.* 2023).

African audiences engage with *Black Panther* through a mix of cultural pride and critical scrutiny, centered around language, representation, and Afrofuturism (Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022; Waghid and Ontong 2022; Sibiya 2024). Afro-diasporic audiences—including Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latinx communities—see *Black Panther* as a catalyst for reconnecting with African identity (Burocco 2019).

Audiences consistently identify with T'Challa irrespective of their ethnicity (González-Velázquez *et al.* 2020). Non-Black audiences generally appreciate the film but show a lower level of identification with the Black characters than Black audiences (González-Velázquez *et al.* 2020; Hall 2022).

Female audiences, particularly Black and African women, have embraced the *Black Panther* franchise for its portrayal of strong, intelligent, and independent Black women, which subverts conventional Hollywood gender roles (Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022). Young women perceive the absence of Eurocentric beauty standards in the film as empowering (Dogan *et al.* 2021; Sewchurran 2022; Waghid and Ontong 2022).

## 2.4 Global Perspectives

In the Global North, audiences predominantly perceive *Black Panther* as an affirmation of Black identity (Dogan *et al.* 2021; Sanders and Banjo 2022). Western audiences, particularly in the UK, are more likely to frame the film within the discourse of Hollywood diversity and inclusion rather than engaging with it from a perspective on cultural representation (Hibbert and Piazza 2023).

Audiences in the Global South engage with *Black Panther* through the lens of their own historical and cultural experiences, resulting in a range of interpretations. Among Afro-Brazilian viewers, responses were mixed. While many celebrated the film's positive representation of Black identity, its cultural significance, and the innovative fusion of African heritage with futuristic technology, others offered more critical perspectives. Some viewers argued that the film reinforces Western hegemonic narratives by presenting an idealized, sanitized vision of Black identity that ultimately upholds the status quo rather than advocating for revolutionary change (Burocco 2019).

South African audiences value the portrayal of African culture (Sewchurran 2022; Waghid and Ontong 2022; Sibiya 2024). They recognize *Black Panther's* departure from stereotypical representations of Africa and appreciate its positive representation of Black individuals (Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022; Sewchurran 2022; Hibbert and Piazza 2023; Sibiya 2024). The film has an empowering effect on viewers, particularly in terms of cultural pride and agency (Makwambeni and Sibiya 2022; Waghid and Ontong 2022; Sibiya 2024).

## 3. DISCUSSION

### 3.1 *Black Panther's* Audience Reception in Context

As a Hollywood blockbuster, *Black Panther* has been extensively studied within its country of origin, particularly in relation to African American identity formation. There is also substantial academic interest in *Black Panther* within African studies, especially concerning Afrofuturism and identity politics. Nevertheless, the majority of studies on this subject describe audience reactions without thoroughly engaging with established theoretical frameworks that explain meaning-making processes.

The scoping review of 13 studies on *Black Panther's* audience reception identifies consistent themes of empowerment, cultural pride, and the affirmation of Black identity, particularly among Black viewers across diverse regions. Audiences widely regarded the film

as a landmark achievement in Black representation within mainstream cinema, offering positive role models and counter-narratives to historically entrenched stereotypes. In the Global North (e.g., the United States and the United Kingdom), discussions primarily centered on issues of racial representation and Hollywood diversity. In contrast, audiences in the Global South (e.g., South Africa and Brazil) engaged with the film through broader historical and cultural lenses, predominantly interpreting it as an empowering affirmation of Blackness that reinforced cultural pride and a sense of agency.

The contrast in reception between audiences from the United States and the United Kingdom versus those from South Africa reflects the influence of distinct public discourses. In the U.S. and UK, media coverage predominantly framed *Black Panther* as addressing the representation gap for African Americans and promoting diversity within mainstream cinema. By contrast, in Sub-Saharan Africa, audiences placed greater emphasis on the politics and accuracy of representation, with particular attention to how Africa was portrayed. Concerns about persistent Western ignorance and misconceptions regarding African peoples and cultures remained a central theme in audience interpretations (Lefait 2020).

The cultural background and historical context of audiences play crucial roles in shaping their reactions to *Black Panther*, resulting in a complex interplay of interpretations and emotional responses across different demographic groups. Media engagement is not an isolated activity; rather, it is deeply embedded within individuals' everyday lives and socio-cultural environments (Ross 2019). In the United States and Europe, racial discourse frequently centers on systemic discrimination within predominantly white societies (Bonilla-Silva 2000; Feagin 2020) and on initiatives aimed at increasing the representation of marginalized or minority groups. By contrast, in the Global South—where a comparable discourse on diversity is absent (Pineda and Mishra 2023)—conversations around race and cultural representation are more closely tied to the enduring impacts of colonialism and neocolonial structures (Aketema and Ladzekpo 2022).

*Black Panther* offers a global cinematic experience that fosters a sense of connection through Black identity and cultural heritage (Hanchard *et al.* 2020). In the United States, Black audiences actively support films featuring Black representation, such as *Black Panther*, both as an affirmation of identity and as a strategy to sustain the visibility and commercial success of Black-led productions. The phenomenon of “must-see Blackness” is deeply intertwined with a politics of visibility, which aims to cultivate a collective support system for Black media content (Martin 2019). Public relations efforts and social media campaigns further amplified community

interest in the representation of Blackness, African culture, and imagery, contributing significantly to the film's box office success in its primary market (Miles *et al.* 2019). In contrast, audience responses in China were mediocre (Lefait 2020), corroborating the notion that viewers of superhero movies tend to connect more with characters of the same race (Hall 2022).

The Walt Disney Company's marketing strategy for the film *Black Panther* involved targeting it to an African American audience as well as to African viewers (Lefait 2020). This approach seemingly prioritized commercial prospects over authenticity (Benash 2021; Odugbemi 2022). The responses from critics, scholars, and audiences alike indicate that the film has been largely successful in establishing rapport through Black representation, particularly through its portrayal of Black women. Concurrently, the film's standardization as a marketable commodity has resulted in significant geographical disparities in audience reception (Burocco 2019) and divergent scholarly evaluations, contingent on the cultural context.

Overall, audiences largely appreciate *Black Panther* for its transformation of traditional stereotypes, offering empowering representations that challenge conventional Hollywood portrayals of Blackness. The audience reactions reported in the reviewed studies do not align with the criticism expressed by scholars who contend that *Black Panther* continues to operate within Hollywood's colonial gaze and falls short of fundamentally challenging Western representations of Africa (Zezeza 2018; Viljoen 2022). The film still caters to a Western gaze (Mayer, 2024) by perpetuating certain stereotypes about Africa. Its depictions of tribalism and its Afrofuturist vision, while innovative, remain rooted in exoticized imaginaries (Sen 2018; Zezeza 2018; Great 2023). Furthermore, the film's success risks reinforcing a simplified narrative of African identity that aligns with Western expectations, raising concerns about the authenticity of its representation (Madowo and Attiah 2018), the commodification and exploitation of Black culture (Marco 2018; Mayer 2024), and the global cultural industry's broader role in shaping and marketing Black identities (Burocco 2019).

*Black Panther* presents Wakanda as an exceptional African nation, emphasizing its cultural uniqueness and technological advancement. In a global media context that has historically marginalized Black people and African cultures, this portrayal of Black exceptionalism holds significant appeal for Black audiences (Marco 2018). However, while such counter-stereotypical representations may be empowering, they do not necessarily dismantle prevailing stereotypes. Research in social psychology suggests that if such representations are perceived as atypical exceptions, audiences may continue to hold negative stereotypes about the broader group (Ramasubramanian *et al.* 2020).

### 3.2 Research Gaps and Future Directions

While the incorporation of various African cultural elements in *Black Panther*'s costume and production design offered what some have described as an "African bingo" (Madowo and Attiah 2018) for African and African American audiences, there is limited empirical evidence on how audiences from different ethnic backgrounds respond to the film's often simplistic and homogenizing portrayal of African cultures (Zezeza 2018). Furthermore, there is a notable gap in research concerning the active role of audiences not only in internalizing but also in co-constructing stereotypes through their interpretation, circulation, and discussion of media representations (Ross 2019). Spontaneous audience responses to racialized tropes—such as the portrayal of Black characters in ways that evoke dehumanizing, ape-like imagery (Sen 2018)—illustrate how viewers participate in the meaning-making process. The *Black Panther* franchise thus offers a compelling case for examining the racialization of fandoms, a topic that remains significantly underexplored in current scholarship (Martin 2019).

Existing research on *Black Panther* has largely centered on Black audiences, with limited attention to comparative analyses that account for racial, cultural, and gendered perspectives. Notably absent are studies that examine audience reception among white, non-Black, Afro-diasporic, and African viewers within a cross-cultural framework. This lack of comprehensive, comparative research presents a significant gap in understanding how diverse cultural contexts influence audience interpretations. Although *Black Panther* has been widely praised for its counter-stereotypical representations—particularly of women (Bucciferro 2021; Khan 2024)—and critiqued for the omission of queer characters (Meyer 2020; Sinwell 2021; Mntungwa 2022), the film's impact on gendered audience perceptions remains underexplored.

While media representations have the potential to shape perceptions and reduce bias, existing studies offer limited insight into whether exposure to *Black Panther*'s counter-stereotypical depictions leads to broader shifts in attitudes, particularly among non-Black audiences. It remains unclear whether such viewers perceive the film as a meaningful challenge to dominant narratives or merely as an isolated "exception" to prevailing representations of Black realities. Another unresolved question concerns *Black Panther*'s capacity to foster intercultural awareness beyond the affirmation of racial and cultural identity. Although feature films are recognized for their potential to enhance intercultural understanding (Bredella 2012), there is currently no empirical evidence demonstrating if, or how, *Black Panther* fulfills this role.

Future research should adopt comparative, cross-cultural methodologies to assess how audiences from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds interpret and engage with the themes and representations presented in *Black Panther*. Such studies could investigate whether *Black Panther* (2018), its sequel *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), or the anticipated *Black Panther 3* (expected 2028) contribute to fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding, particularly among non-Black audiences. Moreover, research should examine how the franchise shapes perceptions of Black identity beyond its fictionalized context and whether it influences broader social attitudes and discourses on race and representation.

The studies included in this review primarily employed focus groups and interviews, methods that are valuable for capturing in-depth audience perceptions but offer a limited view of the broader social dynamics that shape audience reception (Ross 2019; Ademolu 2023). Employing multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex, context-dependent nature of audience engagement beyond structured research environments. Future research would benefit from tracing audience interactions across diverse settings—such as online forums, social media platforms, and informal, everyday conversations—to more effectively capture the fluid, networked, and decentralized processes through which media reception unfolds (Ademolu 2023).

### 3.3 Limitations

This scoping review is subject to several limitations. First, relevant studies may have been overlooked due to database constraints, language barriers, or the specificity of keyword selection. By focusing exclusively on empirical research, the review excluded audience responses captured in reviews, news articles, and other non-academic sources, potentially limiting insight into more informal or mainstream modes of audience engagement. Although the search was not restricted to English-language publications, all included studies were published in English, which may have excluded perspectives from regions with lower academic visibility. In this respect, this scoping review may reflect the marginalization of African epistemologies and lived realities in media research (Mano and Milton 2021). Addressing these limitations in future research could contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of audience reception across varied media landscapes and cultural contexts.

The application of contrast, particularly between the Global North and the Global South, in the context of audience reception studies and this review, can be problematic. This approach frequently results in oversimplified and deterministic interpretations. Such binary normative framing may obscure the complexity

and diversity of audience responses, failing to account for the varied, and at times contradictory, perspectives and lived experiences that shape how individuals engage with mediated representations (Ademolu 2023). Moreover, this dichotomous lens may inadvertently reinforce divisions between Africans, African Americans, and the wider African diaspora, thereby overlooking the nuanced and often contested dynamics of Black identity and authenticity (Adeleke 1998; Okonofua 2013; Madowo and Attiah 2018; Bondarenko 2019).

To avoid the pitfalls of binary categorizations, audience reception research should adopt more nuanced analytical approaches that recognize the diversity within and across different audience groups. Employing an intersectional framework (Crenshaw 1989) would enable a deeper understanding of how intersecting identities—such as race, gender, and class—inform viewer expectations, interpretations, and emotional responses. Such an approach highlights the interconnected and layered nature of audience engagement (Dhoest 2015; Libardi and Jacks 2020), particularly in relation to representations of Black identity and African culture (Ademolu 2023; Woods 2025).

## 4. CONCLUSION

This scoping review explored the reception of *Black Panther* across diverse cultural contexts, focusing on how audiences interpret its representations and engage with both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical imagery. The findings indicate that while *Black Panther* has been widely celebrated—especially among Black audiences—for its empowering portrayals and affirmation of Black identity, audience responses vary considerably depending on socio-cultural and regional contexts. These variations underscore the importance of contextualizing media reception within broader historical, cultural, and political frameworks.

Audiences in the Global North primarily interpreted the film through the lens of Hollywood's diversity discourse, while audiences in the Global South engaged with it from historical and cultural perspectives, often critically examining its portrayal of Africa. Despite *Black Panther's* counter-stereotypical representations, existing research offers no conclusive evidence that the film fosters intercultural understanding beyond the affirmation of Black identity. The persistent influence of a Western gaze continues to provoke critical debates around inclusion, authenticity, and the politics of racial and cultural representation in global cinema.

These findings highlight important gaps in audience reception research. Future studies should adopt comparative and cross-cultural methodologies to examine how diverse audiences engage with *Black*

*Panther* and its sequels. Moving beyond traditional methods such as focus groups and interviews to include ethnographic approaches, digital ethnography, and analyses of online discourse could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how viewers negotiate identity, representation, and cultural narratives in

contemporary media. Additionally, audience reception studies of *Black Panther* and similar films would benefit from applying an intersectional framework to more effectively capture how intersecting identities—such as race, gender, class, and nationality—shape audience interpretations and experiences.

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## Appendix A Screening Prompts

### Title and Abstract Screening Prompt

**Task:** Identify empirical studies that examine audience reception of the film *Black Panther* (2018), while excluding unrelated or purely theoretical analyses.

#### Inclusion Criteria

The article explicitly discusses audience reception of *Black Panther* (2018) in the title or abstract.  
The study is empirical, including data collection and analysis (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups, or social media research).

#### Exclusion Criteria

Articles about the *Black Panther* comic series.  
Articles on the Black Panther Party or unrelated topics.  
Studies analyzing only the film itself (themes, production, characters) without audience research.  
Theoretical papers without empirical data.

#### Assessment Instruction

Indicate "YES" if the title or abstract shows empirical audience reception research; otherwise, mark "NO".

## Full-Text Screening Prompt

**Task:** Identify studies that provide empirical audience reception data on *Black Panther* (2018), focusing on interpretation, emotions, and responses.

### Inclusion Criteria

- The study explicitly examines the audience's reception of *Black Panther*.
- Includes empirical data on interpretation, emotional engagement, or reflection.
- Acceptable methods: surveys, interviews, focus groups, social media analysis, etc.

### Exclusion Criteria

- Studies are not focused on audience reception.
- Papers on representation/themes/production without audience data.
- Theoretical articles without empirical evidence.
- Studies mention reception without analyzing interpretations or emotions.

### Assessment Instruction

Indicate "YES" if the study analyzes empirical audience data; otherwise, mark "NO".

## Appendix B

### Data Extraction Matrix Prompts

## Data Extraction Matrix Column Prompt (Audience Responses to *Black Panther*)

### Task:

Extract and summarize audience responses to *Black Panther* based on empirical data reported in the article. Identify key themes in keywords for concise reporting.

### Data Points to Extract:

1. Emotional Reactions – How do audiences feel about the film? (e.g., empowerment)
2. Reaction to Representation – How do audiences respond to the film's cultural, racial, gender, and other representations? (e.g., pride in Black identity)

### Formatting:

- Summarize responses in keywords or short phrases (e.g., pride, strong female leads).
- If cultural or demographic differences are noted, specify them (e.g., *U.S. audiences: celebration of representation*).

## Data Extraction Matrix Column Prompt (Theoretical Frameworks in *Black Panther* Audience Reception Studies)

### Task:

Extract and list the theoretical frameworks used in each study. Provide keywords that represent the key concepts, models, or theories applied in the research.

### Instructions:

- Identify and extract explicitly mentioned theoretical frameworks used to analyze audience reception in *Black Panther*.
- Summarize using keywords only (no full sentences).
- If multiple theories are used, list them all, separated by commas.
- If no theoretical framework is stated, mark "Not specified".

### Examples of Theoretical Frameworks (Possible Keywords):

- Reception Theory (e.g., Stuart Hall, encoding/decoding model)
- Afrofuturism (e.g., speculative fiction, African diasporic identity, Black utopias)