

Examining Race in Mass Media

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that racial minorities are underrepresented in mass media when compared to Caucasians. Researchers have also explored racial portrayals in mass media and found that when racial minorities are present, they tend to be portrayed in a negative or stereotypical manner. Finally, research points to Cultivation Theory to explain how negative racial portrayals can lead to stereotypes. However, little research has been conducted on racial groups other than Caucasians. Therefore, the proposed study seeks to investigate how racial minorities perceive portrayals of race in mass media. Specifically, focus groups will be used to examine their perceptions and attitudes towards racial portrayals.

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According to TIME Magazine Journalist, Annie Murphy Paul, “We all use stereotypes, all the time, without knowing it. We have met the enemy of equality, and the enemy is us.” (Murphy Paul, 1998). Stereotypes are more prevalent in society today than most people think. Mass media can encourage and reinforce racial stereotypes through character portrayals. Currently, many people have access to technology, which allows them to access most forms of media, including television, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, and movies. According to Anderson (2015), 68% of adults in the United States have a smartphone, and 45% of adults have a tablet computer. *The Daily Mail* reported that people now spend an average of eight hours and forty-one minutes on an electronic device daily (Davies, 2015).

With this much exposure to the media, if racial minorities are portrayed negatively, racial stereotypes may form through Cultivation Theory. According to Gerbner (1998), Cultivation Theory asserts that viewers form a generalized world view and are more likely to accept television portrayals as valid when they frequently watch television (as cited in Lee, Bichard, Irely, Walt, & Carlson, 2009). Therefore, it is important to study racial representations and portrayals in mass media, as well as how those portrayals affect viewers’ perceptions of racial minorities. In this report, I provide a summary of literature on this topic, specifically focusing on racial representations in mass media, racial portrayals in mass media, and Cultivation Theory. This summary will be followed by a critique of literature and end with the methodology for a proposed study that explores perceptions of racial portrayals in mass media.

Summary of Literature

Research within this topic has been extensive, specifically examining racial portrayals and representations in mass media. The literature focuses on Caucasians, African-Americans,

Asian-Americans, Maoris and Pasifikans, Latinos, and Native-Americans. The following sections will explore the literature that exists on this topic, particularly racial representations in mass media, racial portrayals in mass media, and Cultivation Theory.

Racial Representations in Mass Media

Within mass media, the literature specifically focused on websites, advertisements, video games, television programs, and magazine articles. Research shows that Caucasians tend to be overrepresented in mass media, but racial minorities tend to be underrepresented in mass media. For example, Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2015) found that over a span of twenty years, all characters of racial minorities on primetime television formed less than 17% of the total number of characters. This study provides evidence that racial minorities are underrepresented because, as the researchers note, Latinos alone made up 12% of the United States population in 2000 (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Throughout history, African-Americans have been both overrepresented and underrepresented in mass media (Hae-Kyong & Reece, 2003; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Even though racial minorities make up large portions of certain populations, they are not correctly represented when compared to their true percentage of the population.

Caucasians. In mass media, specifically advertisements and television programs, Caucasians tend to be overrepresented when compared to census data. Rubie-Davies, Liu, and Lee (2013) conducted a study that examined advertisements on the four major television channels in New Zealand. For the purpose of this study, “European” was used to describe White actors (Rubie-Davies et al., 2013). They found that 87% percent of the actors in the advertisements were European, while the census data showed that 68% of the population was European. Europeans were also overrepresented in every product category, which included but were not limited to alcohol, banking, fashion, government, and sports (Rubie-Davies et al.,

2013). Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. Tukachinsky et al. (2015) also conducted a content analysis on 345 of the most viewed television shows during primetime from 1987-2008. They found that throughout the years, the number of Caucasian main characters was consistently over 78% (Tukachinsky et al., 2015).

Similarly, Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003) examined 813 children's advertisements on television. Caucasian models were used in 99% of the advertisements (Hae-Kyong & Reece, 2003). While the researchers did not provide the specific percentage of Caucasians in the population, it is safe to assume that Caucasians do not make up 99% percent of the population of the United States. Taken together, these studies provide findings that support the claim that Caucasians tend to be overrepresented in mass media.

African-Americans. Research does not indicate a consistent pattern of representation for African-Americans in mass media. Similar to Caucasians, African-Americans have been overrepresented in the media. Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003) found that while 12.7% of the United States population consisted of African-Americans, African-American models were used in 50.9% of the analyzed advertisements in their study. Researchers have also found that from 1987-1989, 20.6% of the characters on primetime television were African-American (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). On the contrary, Tukachinsky et al. (2015) also found that from 2003-2005, only 11.8% of the characters were African-American. Utilizing the census data from Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003), African-Americans comprised 12.7% of the population in 2003. It is safe to say that African-Americans were underrepresented on primetime television during 2003. In conclusion, the studies provided contradicting evidence about the representation of African-Americans in mass media.

Asian-Americans and Maoris and Pasifikans. On the other hand, other racial minorities are underrepresented on a consistent basis. According to Rubie-Davies et al. (2013), the census data in New Zealand showed that the population was comprised of 22% Maoris and Pasifikans, 9% Asians, and 1% other. When they analyzed the television advertisements, only 7% of the characters were Maori and Pasifikan, 2% were Asian, and 3% were other (Rubie-Davies, 2013). Similarly, Deo, Lee, Chin, Milman, and Wang Yuen (2008) analyzed the race of recurring characters on television programs from 2004-2005. They found that although Asian and Pacific Islander-Americans (APIA) made up approximately 5% of the population, only 1.3% of the recurring characters were APIAs (Deo et al., 2008). Furthermore, APIAs made up 30% of the population in San Francisco, but only one out of five shows based in that location included a main character of APIA descent (Deo et al., 2008).

Latinos. Just as Asian-Americans and Maoris and Pasifikans are underrepresented in the media, so are Latinos. Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found that from 1999-2001, on 345 of the most watched television shows in the United States, only 1.6% of the recurring characters were Latino. During this same time, the 2000 Census showed that Latinos made up almost 12% of the United States population (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). In the same way, Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003) examined racial representations in children's advertisements and found that the census data showed that 13.2% of the children's population was comprised of Latinos, but only 8.7% of the advertisements utilized Latino models.

Native-Americans. While Latinos tend to be drastically underrepresented, Native-Americans are rarely included, and often completely excluded from mass media. Throughout the research, only three studies mentioned Native-Americans. Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found that over a span of twenty-years within 345 televised shows, only three Native-American characters

were present. In the second study, researchers found that viewers often have negative views about Native-Americans on television (Lee et al., 2009). Finally, Mastro (2000) examined the portrayal of racial minorities on television in 1996, but she was unable to examine Native-American characters as there were none (Mastro, 2000).

Racial Portrayals in Mass Media

For the purpose of this report, I define representation as the presence of various races in mass media, while I define portrayal as the behaviors, attitudes, and actions of people and characters of those races. Research often demonstrates that Caucasians are portrayed positively in the media, while racial minorities tend to be portrayed stereotypically or negatively. In support of this claim, while examining racial portrayals in Disney movies, Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner (2003) found that non-dominant cultures were portrayed negatively in ten out of twenty-six movies. Before proceeding, it is important to note that Native-Americans are excluded from this section of the literature review due to a lack of research.

Caucasians. Research suggests that tend to be portrayed more positively than racial minorities in mass media. Both Mastro (2000) and Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003) found that Caucasian characters have main roles more frequently. Additionally, Mastro (2000) found that Caucasians were more likely to be shown at home and in social relationships. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2009) found that viewers perceived Caucasians as having more positive characteristics than racial minorities. This finding suggests that Caucasians were generally portrayed in a positive light (Lee et al., 2009). Eagleman (2011) came to similar conclusions when she found positive portrayals of Caucasian Major League Baseball (MLB) players in sports magazines. She found that 80% of magazine articles, about both international and American Caucasian MLB players, included the theme of working hard to achieve success and having to overcome

obstacles. She also found that 70% of the articles mentioned the role their father played at a young age. Finally, Eagleman (2011) found that Caucasian players were portrayed as coming from a structured family, while their African-American teammates were portrayed as coming from single-parent homes.

African-Americans. Unlike Caucasians, African-Americans tend to be portrayed negatively in mass media. Eagleman (2011) found that in 50% of the articles about African-American MLB players, natural talent was mentioned as the reason for their success, in comparison to Caucasians whose success was attributed to hard work. The articles frequently mentioned if the player was divorced or had a child out of wedlock, two characteristics that often suggest low moral character (Eagleman, 2011). Just as researchers found negative portrayals of African-American baseball players in magazines, Tyree (2011) found stereotypes in all ten of the reality television shows she analyzed. Male African-Americans tended to be portrayed as older stereotypes such as “sambo,” “Uncle Tom,” or “coon;” female African-Americans were typically portrayed as new stereotypes such as “angry Black woman,” “hoochie,” or “chicken head” (Tyree, 2011). The African-American characters often were the cause of drama on the show (Tyree, 2011). Tukachinsky et al. (2015) also found that African-American women tend to be sexualized and portrayed as less professional than Latino and African-American males on television.

Multiple researchers have found negative portrayals of African-Americans. Tan, Zhang, Zhang, and Dalisay (2009) conducted a study in China that examined high-school students’ perceptions of African-Americans. They found that Chinese media tends to portray African-Americans more positively than American media (Tan et al., 2009). For example, American movies portrayed African-Americans as violent and books portrayed them as polite but arrogant,

while Chinese television portrayed African-Americans as honest and moral (Tan et al., 2009). Additionally, researchers found that as undergraduate students spent more time playing video games, they had less favorable views towards African-Americans, no matter how much interracial contact they had (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014). This suggests that within the examined video game, African-Americans may have been portrayed negatively.

Asian-Americans and Maoris and Pasifikans. In addition to African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Maoris and Pasifikans tend to be portrayed negatively. Rubie-Davies et al. (2013) found that Maori and Pasifikan characters were used in advertisements that dealt with bad behaviors, such as gambling and drunk driving. Additionally, Deo et al. (2008) found that only one out of eleven APIA characters were shown in a home setting, creating the idea that they were isolated and invisible. Correspondingly, Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003) found that Asian-Americans were never shown in family relationships. This portrayal is supported by a different study which found that after dividing participants by race on *Survivor: Cook Islands*, Asian-Americans were perceived as the least sociable and least cohesive participants (Bresnahan & Lee, 2011).

Researchers have also found stereotypical portrayals of Asian-Americans. Deo et al. (2008) found that APIA characters were stereotyped as the model minority, another negative portrayal of Asian-Americans. They were portrayed as workaholics, and over half of the APIA characters had high-status careers that would require advanced education (Deo et al., 2008). Additionally, Eagleman (2011) found that international Asian MLB players were portrayed as being different from their teammates in magazine articles. In the articles, cultural differences were often criticized, and the players' physical differences were commonly pointed out. She also found that the articles criticized players that did not speak English (Eagleman, 2011).

Latinos. Latinos also tend to be portrayed negatively in mass media. Hae-Kyong and Reece (2003) found that Latinos were most commonly shown in minor roles and least commonly present in major roles. In addition, Mastro (2000) found that on the television shows she analyzed, 77% of Latino characters appeared on crime programs. Likewise, international Latino MLB players were often portrayed as criminals, lawbreakers, and of poor character in sports magazines (Eagleman, 2011). The players were also portrayed as having success due to natural talent, while their Caucasian teammates were portrayed as having success due to hard work (Eagleman, 2011). Along with magazines, on primetime television Latinos were also portrayed negatively. Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found that Latinos were hyper-sexualized, and Latina women were portrayed as less professional than their male counterparts. Viewers tended to have negative attitudes towards hyper-sexualized characters (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Bresnahan and Lee (2011) examined how viewers' perceptions were affected when participants on *Survivor: Cook Islands* were separated by race. They found that Latinos were perceived as the least competent ethnic group (Bresnahan & Lee, 2011). This finding suggests that Latinos were portrayed negatively on the program, so viewers perceived them negatively.

Cultivation Theory

Many of these studies were framed around Cultivation Theory. Through Cultivation Theory, negative portrayals of racial minority groups can possibly lead to the formation of stereotypes. According to Gerbner (1998), Cultivation Theory is the idea that television causes a generalized worldview for viewers, and they may believe that the portrayals in the media are valid when they watch television frequently (as cited in Lee et al., 2009). Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014) found that video games caused unfavorable views of African-Americans through second-order cultivation effects. According to Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Ortiz (2007),

second-order cultivation effects can affect racial attitudes, and they are made by processing the implied behaviors and traits of racial minorities (as cited in Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014). They also found that video game use may lead to broad-based cultivation, despite the genre of the game (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014). Similarly, Mastro (2000) proposed that viewers may have cultivation effects due to the consistent, negative portrayals of African-Americans on television.

Critique

The above research includes both strengths and weaknesses, and there are still areas in which future research could be conducted. The most prominent strength is that the literature consistently finds that racial minorities are underrepresented in mass media (Deo et al., 2008; Hae-Kyong & Reece, 2003; Mastro, 2000; Rubie-Davies et al., 2013; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). The literature also consistently finds that when racial minorities are present, they tend to be portrayed negatively or stereotypically (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Bresnahan & Lee, 2011; Deo et al., 2008; Eagleman, 2011; Mastro, 2000; Tan et al., 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Tyree, 2011). The literature provides a large amount of information about the representation and portrayal of various races, which reveals that in mass media, the situation is not ideal for racial minorities. The use of quantitative methods was another strength as quantitative research allows the findings to be generalized to broader populations (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Bresnahan & Lee, 2011; Deo et al., 2008; Hae-Kyong & Reece, 2003; Mastro, 2000; Rubie-Davies et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Specifically, since quantitative research allows for large, diverse sample sizes, the data is more representative of the population.

Although the literature had various strengths, it also showed weaknesses. The most prevalent weakness is the limited information on the effects that negative portrayals of racial minorities can have on audience members. Most of the studies performed quantitative research

and statistically analyzed the portrayals of racial minorities in the media. Some of the literature reviews provided evidence that stereotypes could form or be reinforced through Cultivation Theory, but none of the studies specifically tested for a relationship between the two, even though quantitative methods were commonly used. On the other hand, very few studies used qualitative methods. As a result, the data compiled by the researchers has a lot of breadth, but it does not have a lot of depth. In other words, the researchers were able to study large amounts of people, but they were not able to obtain results in the participants' words. Qualitative methods allow researchers to deeply explore the feelings, thoughts, and motivations of their study participants.

Out of thirteen articles, only five attempted to measure viewers' perceptions of racial minorities in mass media (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Bresnahan & Lee, 2011; Lee et al., 2009; Tan et al., 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). From the five articles that analyzed viewers' perceptions of racial minorities, three of them gathered research using surveys (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Bresnahan & Lee, 2011; Lee et al., 2009). Surveys are useful for understanding the attitudes of wide populations, but they do not allow researchers to know why a respondent chose the answer he or she did. In addition, the three previously mentioned articles sampled only college students. This does not provide a diverse response group, and it may not allow for the findings to be generalized to other people.

Also, multiple articles lack data for various races (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, only three studies included Native-Americans in their research. This is most likely due to the lack of Native-American portrayals in mass media. The research also lacked data about the relationship between gender and race. Only three studies examined the relationship between portrayals of gender and race (Deo et al., 2008; Tukachinsky et al., 2015;

Tyree, 2011). Two other studies examined both gender and race, but not the relationship between the two (Rubie-Davies et al., 2013; Towbin et al., 2003). It is important for researchers to examine gender and race in order to find out if one gender is portrayed more positively than the other. Another weakness is that multiple studies only conducted research on commercials or television programs that aired during primetime or “peak times” (Deo et al., 2008; Mastro, 2000; Rubie-Davies et al., 2013; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). This leaves the possibility that at other times of the day, racial portrayals are different (Rubie-Davies et al., 2013).

The previously mentioned weaknesses provide many areas for future research. Future research should focus more on how racial portrayals in the media affect viewers. This would be beneficial because it would provide evidence to show the media companies how the portrayals they generate are affecting audience members. Previous research has shown that racial minorities tend to be portrayed negatively or stereotypically in the media, so it would be interesting to study how those portrayals affect the audience (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Bresnahan & Lee, 2011; Deo et al., 2008; Eagleman, 2011; Mastro, 2000; Tan et al., 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2015; Tyree, 2011). This leads into the second area for future research, using more qualitative methods. Although quantitative methods provide breadth of information and allow findings to be generalized to other texts, qualitative results would allow researchers to understand the latent content, or why a respondent feels the way he or she does. Furthermore, the researchers would be able to deeply understand audience members’ perceptions and attitudes about race in mass media.

Future research should also focus on using more diverse sample groups and not collecting data mainly from Caucasians. It would be interesting to study how people of various racial minorities perceive portrayals of race in mass media. Future research in this area would be

beneficial and gain insight into how people other than Caucasians perceive racial portrayals. In the literature, most of the studies sampled Caucasian participants. As a result, the non-Caucasian population has not been studied sufficiently. Therefore, the following proposed study will examine the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of participants of various racial minorities. Specifically, it will explore their beliefs about racial portrayals in mass media. In order to deeply investigate the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions, the following research question is proposed.

RQ: What are the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of undergraduate students, who identify as racial minorities, about portrayals of race in mass media?

Methodology

In order to examine the proposed research question, I will conduct a study using focus groups. Focus groups allow for an in-depth exploration of the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of the study participants. This exploration will address my research question and provide new insight into the perceptions of the portrayal of race in mass media within various racial minority groups. Focus groups will provide a space for participants to share their ideas with each other, which may generate new ideas. I will also be able to observe the participants' behavior in this setting and interact with more participants because focus groups are a time efficient method for conducting research. The following sections will address how I will gather my participants, the procedures of my study, and how I will analyze the data I collect.

Participants

In order to address my research question, I will recruit participants from Central College to participate in this study using the snowball method. The participants must identify as a racial minority. First, I will ask Central College students if they know anyone who identifies as a racial

minority and would be interested in participating in this study. I will contact each student and explain the study to them in order to gain their consent. I will explain that this study is voluntary and confidential. This process will continue until I have a total of twelve to sixteen participants. I will start on the Central College campus, but I will expand to the entire Pella area if the study does not generate enough interest. I plan on having two focus groups, and each group will have six to eight participants. If more than twelve to sixteen people total wish to participate, I will create additional focus groups. If there are less than twelve to sixteen participants total, I will create only one focus group. Participants will be placed in a focus group based on the order by which they agree to participate. As an incentive, caramel bars, cookies, lemonade, and ice water will be offered at the focus group meeting.

Procedure

Once the participants are selected, I will conduct the study using focus groups. In order to ensure that the maximum number of participants can attend the focus groups, I will send out a Doodle poll to each participant that includes available meeting times. Each participant will then fill out their availability, and the day and time of each focus group will be selected based on the highest number of available participants. The focus groups will be held in the Boat Room, located in the Maytag Student Center at Central College. As a contingency plan, Weller 101 will also be reserved for the selected date and time. In order to ensure full voluntary consent, each participant will sign a consent form at the beginning of each focus group. The consent form will also contain permission to record each focus group session. In order to collect data, I will visually record all of the focus groups. I will facilitate a conversation between the participants, so I will prepare a list of semi-structured questions (see Appendix). However, I will also spontaneously generate questions based on the content of the discussion. During the opening of

the focus group, I will build rapport by asking participants about their favorite movies and television programs. I also plan on engaging with them in small talk and sharing some of my favorite movies and television programs. After some rapport is built, I will conduct the orientation of the interview. In other words, I will further explain the purpose of the study, the expected length of each focus group, and ensure that each participant has completed the consent form. I will maintain rapport throughout the interview by offering support for some of their comments and being responsive. As a contingency plan, I will bring multiple magazines to each focus group meeting. If there is not enough discussion within the group, I will ask each participant to look through the magazines, focusing on the advertisements and the people within them. The participants will then discuss what they observed about the advertisements. I expect each focus group to last from an hour to an hour and a half. After the focus groups are conducted, I will send thank-you notes to each participant.

Data Analysis

In order to deeply analyze my data, I will take multiple steps. While conducting the focus groups, I will be taking detailed notes. I will take these notes somewhat discreetly so the participants do not feel uncomfortable. I will also visually record each of the meetings and then transcribe these recordings. Once I have a transcription, I will start analyzing my data with open-coding. This will include reading the data and looking for emergent themes. Next, I will go back through the data and develop themes. I will be looking for recurring themes, themes that contradict each other, and themes that I perceive to be absent from the discussion. Finally, I will reread all of the data and conduct focused-coding. This will include finding every instance of each theme within the data. I will then describe these themes and draw conclusions based upon them. Throughout the entire coding process, I will be constantly comparing the data with the

themes. Based on what previous research has found, I expect that the participants will agree that the media does not sufficiently include racial minorities and they are portrayed negatively. I also expect that the participants will be aware of the underrepresentation and negative portrayals of racial minorities.

In this day and age, many people have access to technology. With technology, users can access every form of mass media, so it is important to analyze what is being portrayed to try and prevent stereotypes from forming. Research has already explored Caucasian, undergraduate students' perceptions of racial portrayals in mass media. However, this proposed study aims to investigate the perceptions of various racial minority groups. This proposed study has several weaknesses and strengths. First, self-censorship is always a possible weakness when conducting focus groups. Participants may not feel comfortable disclosing information around other people. Second, the researcher does not have complete control over the direction of the conversation. Even though I will have a list of questions prepared, the conversation could go in any direction. Finally, since a qualitative method is being used, the results cannot be generalized to other populations. On the other hand, focus groups provide a time efficient method in which many participants can be interviewed at one time. Additionally, some of the participants may share their ideas, which could help generate new ideas for other participants. This proposed study will contribute to the body of research about racial portrayals in mass media. This study will add new depth to the research, as it will examine the perceptions of racial groups that have not yet been researched.

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Appendix

1. What are your thoughts on race in mass media in general? This includes television, news, magazines, film, and advertisements.
2. What have you noticed about racial representations in mass media? For the purpose of this study, I define representation as the number of racial minority present in mass media.
 - a. Is there enough?
 - b. Is there too little?
 - c. Can you think of any specific examples?
3. What racial stereotypes are commonly used in mass media?
 - a. Further, what are they?
 - b. How are the characters portrayed? For the purpose of this study, I define portrayals as the behaviors, attitudes, and actions of characters within mass media.
4. What changes have you seen in racial portrayals in mass media over time?
 - a. If any, has the situation gotten better or worse?
 - b. Why do you think this is?
5. How well do entertainment industries do at portraying racial minorities? (For example, music, food, television, movie, etc.)
 - a. Is there a particular industry that does very well at portraying racial minorities in mass media?
 - i. What makes the portrayals good/positive?
 - ii. Can you think of any specific examples?
 - b. Is there a particular industry that does poorly at portraying racial minorities in mass media?

- i. What makes the portrayals bad/negative?
 - ii. Can you think of any specific examples?
6. What do you think the effects of these portrayals and representations are?
 - a. What negative effects could they have?
 - i. Can you think of any specific examples?
 - b. What positive effects could they have?
 - i. Can you think of any specific examples?
 - c. How do these portrayals affect you?
 - i. How do they affect your self-perception?
 - ii. How do they affect your perception about your own racial group?