Impacts of Black Athlete Media Portrayals on Canadian Youth

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Abstract: This paper examines the limitations of present theory concerning media and race, and provides a rationale for using Janice Radway’s concept of “interpretive communities” as a means for theorizing the “impacts” of media portrayals on audiences. Results are reported from a focus group study that used the “interpretive community” framework to assess adolescent reactions to black portrayals in television. Issues surrounding the impacts of black athlete portrayals are examined as a crucial case, considering the cultural importance of these figures for certain youth cultures. The results offer insights into the impacts of media portrayals of race in several key areas, including minority self-perceptions, racial awareness, racial stereotyping, perceived conditions of social mobility, and perceived racial equality. They also demonstrate the need to conceptualize media impacts as intertextual and dialogical events that occur as an interaction between the audience and the media.

Résumé: Cette recherche a pour but d’étudier les limites de théories concernant les médias et la race et justifie l’usage du concept de communautés interprétées (interpretive communities) développé par Janice Radway pour comprendre les effets des représentations médiatiques sur les spectateurs. Les résultats présentés proviennent d’analyses de groupes cibles, se servant du cadre théorique intitulé communautés interprétées pour mesurer les réactions d’adolescents aux représentations de Noirs à la télévision. Les enjeux concernant les effets des représentations d’athlètes noirs sont étudiés en tant que cas crucial, compte tenu de l’importance culturelle de ces individus pour certains groupes de jeunes. Les résultats nous offrent un aperçu des effets des représentations raciales dans les médias par rapport à plusieurs éléments: perceptions de groupes minoritaires, sensibilisation aux individus de différentes races, stéréotypes raciaux, et perceptions de mobilité sociale et d’égalité raciale. Les résultats démontrent également l’importance de concevoir les effets des médias comme des événements intertextuels et dialogiques résultant de l’interaction entre médias et auditeurs.

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This paper reports findings from a study that used focus group methodology to investigate the impacts of media racial narratives on adolescent consumers of these narratives. The study focused on black athlete portrayals in television commercial messages and their impacts on black and non-black adolescent male viewers who were sport enthusiasts. Race is conceptualized in the paper as a social construct that is context-dependent and connected with relations of power (see Anthias, 1990; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, Zine, & Ogbo, 1997; Gilroy, 1987). The term black as used here is intended to identify African-Americans, African-Canadians, and Caribbean-Canadians. Non-black refers to those individuals in the Canadian context who are not encompassed in the first term and, in this paper, includes mainly European-Canadians and Asian-Canadians. Although recently there have been encouraging developments in the study of race and the media (see, for example, Hunt, 1997; Jhally & Lewis, 1992), very little research has examined empirically the processes through which media representations influence youth audiences, and even less has focused on the impacts of sport racial narratives on youth, despite the fact that sport is a significant site of racial socialization and form of popular culture. This paper attempts to move research in this area forward through an integrative approach that draws together theoretical and empirical work from media studies and racial studies. The approach has been undertaken as part of a larger project focused on youth racial identity, sport, and the media (see Wilson, 1995). An important goal of this project has been to build on the work of Fish (1979) and Radway (1991) and theorize adolescent sport audiences as “interpretive communities” whose distinct interpretive characteristics emanate from their cultural affinities and identities as well as their creative competencies (Willis, 1990).

The framework for the paper borrows from Radway and Fish and from a previous essay (Wilson & Sparks, 1996) in which a case was made for integrating the interpretive community framework with youth subcultural theory. Building on this research, which focused on the relationship between sport-related advertising that features sport celebrity icons and youth subcultures, the present paper concentrates on the “impacts” of media portrayals of race on youth audience perceptions of race. As with the previous study, this research utilizes an interpretive theoretical framework, but here the focus is shifted to race studies, particularly theories focused on black portrayals in the mass media. The paper is organized in three sections. First, a selective review is provided of research on black portrayals in the media, drawing on work in textual analysis, content analysis, and the media “effects” traditions, and more extensively on recent research on the black athlete. A brief but critical overview is provided of work in these areas together with a justification and rationale for the paper’s empirical approach. Second, findings are reported from the core study of youth audiences by Wilson (1995). Third, the implications of the findings are briefly discussed and conclusions drawn about media impacts as well as areas warranting further research.

As in our previous work, this paper is founded on the idea that audience interpretations and understandings are not determined by and/or controlled by media
texts. Audiences are considered to be active interpreters, users, and consumers of the media (in this case, television), not passive “recipients” of or mindless reactors to media messages. At the same time, media narratives, forms, and contents obviously are a crucial part of what audiences interpret and use. We acknowledge, therefore, following Jhally & Lewis (1992), that there is always an interaction or “dialogue” between the television message and the viewer that needs to be worked out in audience research:

We assume that the significance, or meaning, of television in popular culture is a product of the interplay between a television program and the attitudes the viewer brings to it. We accept, therefore, that television is influential. But we also accept that the precise nature of its influence is unpredictable: it will depend upon viewers who have thoughts, interests, and opinions before they sit down in front of the screen. . . . (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 9; for ongoing debates about audience research methodology and theory see, for example, Allor, 1988; Cobley, 1994; Grossberg, 1988; Lewis, 1991; Lull, 1988; McGuigan, 1992; Radway, 1986; Seaman, 1992; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, & Warth, 1989; Silverstone, 1990)

The audience research method we have used is inspired by Radway’s (1986) interpretive approach. Radway demonstrated that “in-depth, qualitative analysis of the way an audience encounters, interprets and uses mass media” can help to clarify how media texts function for the larger culture, and how interventions to change that culture might best be approached (p. 99; for ongoing debates about the interpretive community concept, see Ang, 1991; Machin & Carrithers, 1996; Radway, 1988; Schoder, 1994). In this study, the “dialogues” between television messages and viewers that are analyzed are dialogues of race. The study was conducted in Canada, a nation where subtle but concrete forms of discrimination against blacks still occur, both informally in everyday life and formally through social policies that tacitly support institutional and structural disadvantages for blacks in employment, education, and the justice system, among other areas (Agocs & Boyd, 1993; Boyd, 1992; Cannon, 1995; Collinson, Knights, & Collinson, 1990; Fernandez, 1988; Foster, 1996; Henry, 1994; Henry & Ginzberg, 1990). This context proves to be an important background against which to understand black and non-black youths’ interpretations of media messages about celebrity black athletes.

**Review of theory and research**

**Approaching black representation**

Theories of black representation in the mass media have tended to focus on how the media constructs narratives that are either stereotypical and derogating, or non-stereotypical and misleading. Either way, the representational affects and communicative power of the media typically have not been questioned. Hall (1995) has argued that in modern societies the mass media are an important site for the production, reproduction, and transformation of (racial) ideologies:
What they [the media] “produce” is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work. And, amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the “problem of race” is understood to be. They help to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race. (p. 20, emphasis added)

Despite Hall’s apparent “neutrality” in this passage, most textual research emphasizes the negative ideological context and consequences of media representations of race. For example, Dates & Barlow (1990) have argued that the mass media help legitimate inequalities in class and race relations because “colour coded positive and negative moralistic” images “become familiar and accepted” and, in turn, “fuel misconceptions and perpetuate misunderstandings about race” (p. 4). In this view, television representations that may initially appear as counter-hegemonic, such as fictional dramatizations of black success like the *Cosby Show* and non-fictional documentaries about black poverty, end up losing their critical potential intertextually and ideologically because they take place in a media context that, in the main, is devoid of information about the conditions that perpetuate black oppression (and white domination) in North America. By “privileging individual attributes and middle class values and by displacing social and structural factors” these kinds of programs construct black success and black failure jointly as conditions of personal responsibility and not of social milieu—a form of “modern racism” (Gray, 1989, p. 376; see also Entman, 1990, 1992; Mills, 1981). In the absence of a clear counter-hegemonic agenda in the media, it is argued that the media mainly act as agents of the racial status quo, contributing to racist understandings and extant relations of power.

In the Canadian context, Henry (1994) supported this thesis, arguing that “the media play a crucial role in reinforcing the racialization of crime” by using highly dramatic and evocative language when reporting crime stories involving blacks (“black crime”) (p. 221; see also Fleras, 1995; Foster, 1996). Henry illustrated his case using an article published in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s national newspaper:

The article [“Island Crime Wave Spills Over: Criminal Subculture Exported to Canada,” July 1992] . . . note[s] that, although it is now unpopular to discuss Black crime in Toronto, it is quite clear that “this criminal subculture has been exported” [from Jamaica] and is evident on the streets of Toronto and, to a lesser extent, in Montreal. Named and unnamed Toronto police sources are quoted as saying that Black crime is no myth, it is reality “which manifests itself in police records” and is proof that “a volatile group of young Jamaican males has altered Toronto's criminal landscape . . . in an explosion of guns and crack cocaine”. . . Local Jamaican experts are quoted as saying that crack cocaine is the result of the hopelessness of life among the poor and the breakdown of the family . . . . [The article] ends by offering another “expert’s” opinion that Jamaican's are aggressive and violence-prone because they are the descendants of the most rebellious slaves who were offloaded in Jamaica more than two centuries ago. (Henry, 1994, p. 220)
Implicit in Henry’s research and other research noted in this section is an underlying assumption that the overall impact of black portrayals on audiences is negative. Yet, with few exceptions (such as Hall, 1980), the audience has not been sufficiently problematized in this research and continues to be treated in the main as a “mass audience.” One is left to wonder, for example, whether some audience members (such as non-blacks) might perhaps be more “at risk” for negative impacts from media portrayals of blacks than others. Other issues such as how personal and interpersonal attributes might affect the reception of media messages or whether peoples’ cultural affinities and social locations might result in them sharing common interpretations and prejudices (as “interpretive communities”) are equally opaque in textual research.

Ethnographic studies of race, culture, and youth in Canada have provided important information about the context of media consumption and the processes of socialization and identity formation. To date, however, research in this area has not addressed head-on the role of audiences in defining the meaning and social impacts of media messages, even though there are indications of how these processes might occur. For example, Henry’s (1994) study in Toronto used interviews and participant observation as methods for gaining insight into experiences with racism and identity construction for individuals of black and Caribbean origin. Henry’s work included interviews with black youth, who believed that teachers in their schools tend to treat them “as an undifferentiated black rather than individuals” and that they were “generally expected to excel in sports but not in academic subjects” (Henry, 1994, p. 136). Other work by Solomon (1992) on black cultural resistance in a Toronto high school confirmed Henry’s findings and showed how youth tended to adopt cultural identities as “jocks” or “rastas” as a means to symbolically resist the expectations of authority figures in their school—expectations that these youth believed to be insensitive to their distinct racial backgrounds and experiences. These findings about the ways these youth negotiated their identities in these social circumstances highlights the complexities of black identity construction in the Canadian racial context. Walcott’s (1997) work on black identity in relation to the identity politics of the Canadian state is also important to consider here (see also Foster, 1996; Kelly, 1998). While fully acknowledging the importance of this prior work and the wide range of issues that pertain to race and identity construction, we suggest that there remains a need to understand how youthful audiences interpret popular media representations of race such as those found in the portrayals of black athletes in athletic apparel commercials, and to ascertain how youth relate these interpretations to their experiences in daily life. Such research, we feel, forms a necessary complement to the existing corpus of ethnographic research on race, culture, and youth.

Content analysis and race images
Content analysis research generally supports the above theorizations by demonstrating empirically that blacks are underrepresented and stereotyped in media messages. In their comprehensive review of social research on minorities in the mass media, Greenberg & Brand (1994) outlined three major content analyses that
assessed the presence or absence of minorities in television content. Two
decade-long studies (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979; Seggar, Hafenand, & Han-
nonen-Gladden, 1981) and a program sample (Weigal, Loomis, & Soja, 1980) of
television comedies, dramas, and movies showed blacks to represent an average of
8% of all characters and to fill 8% of total appearance time. Also, these appear-
ances were concentrated in very few television programs, where “75% of the total
time blacks were visible occurred in just 18% of the shows . . . and black charac-
ters were six times as likely to be presented in comedies as in dramas” (Greenberg
& Brand, 1994, p. 276). More recent research that included non-fiction portrayals
(such as news) showed a small increase in the number of blacks shown during
prime time television, with no notable changes in all other areas of programming
(Greenberg & Brand, 1994). News portrayals of blacks involved with crime were
also shown to be comparatively “more negative” than comparable stories/inci-
dents involving whites (focusing more on the dubious attributes of the black sus-
pects/criminals) (Corea, 1990; Entman, 1992; Greenberg, 1986; Greenberg &
Brand, 1994; Martindale, 1985).

Research on the representation of blacks in television commercials showed
blacks to be somewhat more visible in this sphere than in other areas of television
programming. Weigal, Loomis, & Soja (1980) measured minority presence in
terms of “time-on-air” during prime-time programming and found blacks to be
visible in commercials 8.5% of the time, to appear in 20% of commercials, but to
appear in “all-black” commercials less than 2% of the time, and to actually
interact with whites less than 2% of the time. This study unveiled a common trend
for blacks to be present in about 20% of commercials throughout the viewing day,
but to be less prominent than whites in these commercials (Weigal, Loomis, &
Soja, 1980; Wilson, 1995; Wonsek, 1992). More generally, blacks have tended to
be concentrated in specific types of programming, especially comedy, music, and
sport (see, for example, Barcus, 1983; Corea, 1990; Entman, 1990, 1992; Real,
1989; Weigal & Howes, 1982; Wonsek, 1992). In the Canadian context, racial
minorities (not exclusively blacks) were shown to be underrepresented or por-
trayed stereotypically in billboard advertising and in major magazines, as well as

These patterns of negative black representation are magnified for black
women, who are both underrepresented and stereotypically portrayed. Although
this point is not pursued in context, these conditions are thought by some to con-
tribute to black female disempowerment in both racial and gender terms “by
denying them a greater presence in television and stereotyping them into passive
roles that reinforce their position as having no voice” (Rhodes, 1995, p. 424; see
also Dates, 1987). The relative disenfranchisement of black women in the media
with respect to men has bearing in a context such as sport, where male celebrity
black athletes occupy a privileged media position. We return to this point at the
end of this paper.

Despite these consistent patterns of negative representations and exclusions,
significant non-stereotypical portrayals emerged in several media genres during
the late 1980s. These included the successful rise of the *Cosby Show* and the increased number of blacks gaining notable positions in dramatic television programming (e.g., *Miami Vice*), in talk shows (e.g., the *Oprah Winfrey Show*), and in other selected areas including news (e.g., Bernard Shaw, a White House journalist) (Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, Feshbach, Katz, Murray, Rubinstein, Wilcox, & Zuckerman, 1992). While in many respects these changes are laudatory, critics have continued to argue that such “progressions” do not transcend the larger problems that persist in television in terms of black exclusion and black stereotypes or the potential difficulties surrounding these few positive portrayals, such as the affects of “modern racism.” Here again, as with textual analysis studies, there is insufficient basis within the tradition of content analysis itself (as it has been applied to race and media studies) to be able to discern whether or not the critics are correct. Conclusions about media impacts tend to be based on media contents themselves, and the frameworks of their consumption, adaptation, and use by audiences are not specifically examined.

**Media “effects” research and audience research**

Until recently, the most prevalent form of research that examined audiences was rooted in the “effects” tradition and used experimental and survey methodologies to “measure” the attitudinal and behavioural consequences of audience exposures to media messages. These studies provided some insights into the potential impacts of race portrayals on viewing audiences. Of particular significance in this area is Atkin, Greenberg, & McDermott’s (1983) survey of 316 white elementary-school students who regularly watched all-black television shows. The researchers found that the viewers’ interpretations of black television character traits were closely related to parallel beliefs about the “real” world. Although this correlation was believed to result, in part, from the selective distortion of the televised portrayals by the viewer, the researchers indicated that the incoming perceptions exerted a notable influence. The researchers concluded that television serves to reinforce what is learned outside of the television viewing context while offering new information where little prior information existed for the audience member (see also Gorn, Goldberg, & Kanungo, 1976; Greenberg & Atkin, 1982; Vidmar & Rokeash, 1974). Studies have also suggested that black television programming impacts the self-esteem of black children who use black portrayals to “reflect upon themselves” (Greenberg & Brand, 1994, p. 300; see also McDermott & Greenberg, 1984; Meyer, Donohue, & Henke, 1978), while minority role models in television programs (*non-stereotypical* portrayals of blacks) have been shown to enhance interracial perceptions (Allsopp, 1982). There was also evidence suggesting that blacks who were heavy viewers of television programming were significantly more aware of the low numbers of blacks shown on television, although it was not clear that these viewers were critical of the ways that blacks were portrayed (Faber, O’Guinn, & Meyer, 1987).

The “media effects” tradition generally has been criticized on three counts: for using short term studies to measure long term effects, for attempting to create “control” conditions for an event (television viewing) that cannot be reproduced
outside of the actual site of consumption, and for inherently treating the television viewer as a passive recipient of information (stimuli) (Lewis, 1991). These criticisms demonstrate the problems associated with much of the existing experimental research on minorities and television audiences. Although Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli (1980, 1994) have adopted a more sophisticated “cultivation perspective” on the media that acknowledges long-term, intertextual influences (Faber, O’Guinn, & Meyer’s 1987 research supported this hypothesis), this approach has recently been criticized for “disguis[ing] television’s many subtleties beneath a façade of arithmetic precision” (Lewis, 1997, p. 89) and for not adequately addressing the relationship between audiences and race portrayals (Greenberg & Brand, 1994).²

The “new audience research” (used in this paper) was, in part, a reaction to these shortcomings of the “effects” tradition, and emphasized naturalistic forms of analysis rather than experimental design. In one of the few examples where this new approach was used to study race, Lewis (1991) examined audience reactions to the *Cosby Show* using focus group methodology (see also Jhally & Lewis, 1992). He found that non-stereotypical portrayals of blacks tended to reinforce a kind of “enlightened racism” where the apparent “absence of poverty, struggle or any class or racial barriers . . . misleads the [white] viewer into supposing that the struggle, for most black people, is over” (Lewis, 1991, pp. 199-200). While this study supported explanations offered by researchers using other methods, the “direct” evidence it provided and its more rigorous qualitative approach to understanding audience interpretations made it an exceptional theoretical and empirical contribution. Hunt’s (1997) examination of audience reactions to the Los Angeles Riots, Bodroghkozy’s (1995) research on audience interpretations of the black sitcom *Julia*, and Bobo’s (1995) study of black women’s reactions to the movie *A Color Purple* are a few other notable studies in this sparse area of research, although they do not relate centrally to the issues raised in this paper.

**The mediated black athlete**

Further to the studies of black underrepresentation and stereotyping in the media noted above, a distinct research agenda has emerged focusing on the portrayal of the black male athlete.³ Studies in this area have demonstrated a recurrent media stereotype wherein the black athlete is characterized through an emphasis on “natural athleticism”—a description consistent with racist theories that “propose that blacks possess physiological characteristics that contribute to superior speed, reflexes and jumping ability” (Carlston, 1986, p. 89). These depictions contrast with media accounts of the white athlete, who is more often said to be “smart” and “hard working” (Coakley, 1990; Davis, 1990; Jhally 1989; Staples & Jones, 1985). The biological theories underlying this stereotype were described by Andrews (1996, drawing on Dumm, 1993, and Omi & Winant, 1994) who pointed out that biological theories of race reinforce black inferiority (or in the modern case, “natural” *physical superiority* and *mental inferiority*) by creating racial hierarchies that define blacks as a racial Other “in terms of interconnected sociocultural, phenotypical and genotypical differences” (p. 128).
A succinct critique of these “genetic theories” of black athlete sport performance was provided by Carlston (1986) in his work on race differences in basketball performance:

First, most of the theories are based on assumed differences between white and black athletes that have not been convincingly demonstrated with appropriate samples. . . . Neither physiological nor personality differences have been shown to exist between carefully selected samples of black and white athletes. Furthermore, the tremendous heterogeneity in body and personality types within each racial group contrasts markedly with the homogeneity attributed to the athletic styles of each group. . . . Second, these theories fail to provide a tight linkage between the antecedents they assume and the kinds of performance differences that have been observed. . . . Finally . . . none of the existing theories for race differences in athletic performance can account for more than a small portion of the differences that appear to exist. . . . Even then if these different [biological] theories were substantiated, there would still be glaring gaps in our understanding of race differences in playing styles. (p. 87; see also Greenberg, 1989)

Richard Lapchick provided a more general analysis of the faulty logic and distorted “natural” realities that surround blacks in sport:

We have spent six decades since Jesse Owens trying to prove scientifically there's some difference between black and white athletes to explain [the black athlete's] succeeding dominance to the point it is today . . . there's never been one study to prove the racial theory in sport, the fact we try to prove it is a reflection we are uncomfortable in white-dominated society. We need some explanation, so we can accept they [blacks] are better physical specimens, while we contend we [whites] are intellectual. (Quoted in Christie, 1996, p. C16; see also Edwards, 1969, 1973)

The media and athletic apparel companies (e.g., Nike) have reinforced this ideology in their use of denigratory marketing narratives of the “natural” black athlete (for example, Michael Jordan):

The focus of Nike's Air Jordan initiative [early in Jordan's basketball career] keyed on Jordan's physical prowess, and thus corroborated the taken-for-granted assumptions pertaining to the natural element of black corporeality. Jordan's repeatedly valorized sporting body thus became a prominent, if underscored, signifier of racial Otherness, a seemingly material vindication of what popular racist discourse has extolled all along. (Andrews, 1996, p. 137)

Other researchers have documented the overrepresentation of blacks on television in athletic contexts, such as the athletic apparel commercial. Wonsek's (1992) study of television commercials during the 1988 NCAA basketball tournament showed “black images” to be present in 19.27% of the commercials, with 9.45% of the commercials having major black spokespersons or images. Wonsek emphasized that the low number of major black spokespersons/images in the commercials (except for athletic apparel commercials) was especially degrading for blacks because the advertising was during a black athlete-dominated sports event.
An analysis of non-stereotypical portrayals of the black athlete was provided by Wenner (1994) in his research on television commercials featuring black athletes shown during broadcasts of the U.S.A. basketball “Dream Team” games at the 1992 Summer Olympics. He showed how the portrayal of the black professional basketball players in the role of celebrity can be “comforting” for a white audience, especially against a “silent” background of racial inequality in the United States (see also McKay, 1995). The commercials constructed their athlete-subjects as embodying nationalism, multiculturalism, hard work, and the realization of dreams. Wenner (1994) suggested that these “positive” portrayals, despite their apparently open construction of multiculturalism and race, actually limit the social possibilities of black Americans by reinforcing the perception that sport is a sufficient means of social mobility for blacks and adding to the illusion of a meritocratic society (similar to Jhally & Lewis’s [1992] “enlightened racism”). Wenner contended that these limitations were magnified within the “preferred reading” of the television commercials, that is, the understanding that he felt most audience members would have of the television commercial (Hall, 1980). Andrews (1996) presented a similar argument about the mass-mediated image of Michael Jordan, who he described as “embodying personal drive, responsibility, integrity and success” (pp. 138-139). According to Andrews (1996), Jordan has been able to “pander the racial insecurities and paranoia of the white majority,” primarily because he has been able to shed his black identity in promotional contexts (p. 139). For Andrews (1996), Jordan has achieved a “degree of popular approval that superficially would seem to legislate against the presence of race-based discrimination within American society” (p. 139).

Wilson (1997; see also Wilson, 1999) analyzed black athlete representations in Canadian media in a range of television contexts (athletic apparel commercials, social marketing messages, player profiles) and in newspaper coverage of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in southern Ontario. This study showed how portrayals fell into contradictory categories of “the ‘good’ black and the ‘bad’ black” (see also Kellner, 1996; Wenner, 1995). On the one hand, black athletes were shown, at times, to have a “work ethic,” to demonstrate “courage,” and to have effectively “willed” their way out of the ghetto (comfortable images for a dominant white audience). On the other hand, media reports often emphasized criminal activity among black players, while player profiles and athletic apparel commercials contained images of the athletes that were often ominous and intimidating (see also Kimmel, 1995; Lule, 1995; McKay & Smith, 1995; Messner & Solomon, 1993). These findings were analyzed using Lule’s (1995) conception of modern racism to show how media portrayals attribute black (specifically African-American) success or failure to an ability or inability to take advantage of available opportunities that exist in the (apparent) absence of structural barriers to social mobility.

Wonsek (1992) similarly argued that these kinds of negative images support a racist ideology and “likely audience inference” that blacks are “‘naturally’ inferior, ‘naturally’ threatening and ‘naturally’ athletic” (p. 457), while the overrepre-
sentation of the black athlete in athletic apparel commercials and the positioning of the black athlete as either “ghetto dweller”/criminal or as a “celebrity” icon (but in all cases athlete) are limiting for blacks by reinforcing the view of the black as “athlete only.” Kellner (1996) illuminated the way these judgments about the “good black and the bad black” in sport extend beyond the basketball court and playing field:

Michael Jordan is a spectacle of color who elevates difference to sublimity and who raises blackness to dignity and respect. Yet, such are the negative representations and connotations of blackness in American culture and such is the power of the media to define and redefine images that even the greatest black icons and spectacles can be denigrated to embody negative connotations. As Michael Jackson, O. J. Simpson, and Mike Tyson have discovered, those who live by the media can die by the media and overnight their positive representations and signification can become negative. Media culture is only too happy to use black figures to represent transgressive behavior and to project society’s sins onto black figures. (Kellner, 1996, p. 465)

Despite the apparent descriptive power and strength of the arguments outlined in this section concerning the ideologies of black athlete portrayals, it is important to emphasize that these findings/theories are not corroborated with research about audience interpretations. In the end, this omission limits our capacity to explain “media impacts” other than in conjectural terms.

Where’s the audience?: A critique of literature on blacks in the media
In the above review we attempted to demonstrate how research focused on black portrayals in the media has not yet adequately accounted for audience interpretations of these portrayals nor theorized in a comprehensive way the status of “media impacts” as they relate to these interpretations (with several notable exceptions, including Hunt, 1997; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; and Lewis, 1991). While theories derived from textual and content research and from experimental and survey studies have been crucial to the development of a conceptual framework for examining race portrayals, missing in most of these accounts and discussions is the idea that diverse audiences might interpret media portrayals in dissimilar ways, using distinct “interpretive strategies.” These absences are especially evident in studies of black athlete portrayals, a notable deficit considering the well-developed textual and content analysis research in this area. This is not to question the value of identifying the potentially negative outcomes of stereotypical and non-stereotypical portrayals. On the contrary, we are suggesting only that a further step in research and analysis is required if comprehensive understandings of “media impacts” are to be attained. The following study takes this step by investigating the impacts of black athlete portrayals in television commercials on male youth audiences using focus group methodology.

Design of study
The background research for this study had two phases. In the first, a subsample of six athletic apparel commercials featuring black athletes was selected from an
overall sample of commercials recorded during the 1994 NCAA men’s basketball tournament and the 1994 NBA playoffs. These were chosen with the intention of prompting discussion about the celebrity black athletes featured in the commercials, about race portrayals in general, and about experiences with race in everyday life for the groups recruited to review the segments. In the second phase, the subsample was viewed by seven groups of youth (with two to eight subjects in each group) who routinely watched televised basketball. Three groups were comprised of 15- to 19-year-old black males (n=14) recruited in Toronto, a city with a significant black population (for Canada). Four groups were comprised of 15- to 19-year old non-black males (n=23) recruited in Vancouver to comprise a segment that had little experience with blacks (based on the demographic make-up of the city).5

The members of each focus group were drawn from the same school and typically were friends (and in most cases played basketball together). All groups shared an interest in playing basketball and were regular or occasional viewers of televised basketball. The goal of the recruitment strategy was to find groups of adolescents with similar interests and a common youth “culture.” These stipulations did not strictly control for socio-economic class, although the sample that emerged was predominantly middle class and quite homogeneous culturally and economically. All the youth were born in Canada and had been living in their current locations for the past several years. Using groups of friends was intended to put the participants more at ease when talking about a sensitive issue like race. All indications were that this method worked, as the groups did not exhibit overt signs of polarization or dissonance when discussing racial topics and issues.

We recognize that the analytical distinction between black and non-black youth is in many respects arbitrary and risks understating the racial diversity between and within the two groups that were identified in the study. Nevertheless, because we were concerned with how racial identity (as a dimension of lived cultural experience) might mediate youth reactions to racially specific commercial messages on television, it was necessary to differentiate the participants’ race with respect to the images of race in the commercials themselves. These images were mainly of African-American celebrity athletes in the NBA. Based on prior research (Henry, 1994; and more recently, Fleras, 1995, and Foster, 1996) we reasoned that, other factors being equal, African-Canadians and Caribbean-Canadians would potentially have closer identification with and affinities for the athletes in the commercials than other groups such as Indo-Canadians (who sometimes self-identify as “black”) and might, therefore, comprise a unique “interpretive community.” These distinctions, we hoped, would enable us to “test” the assumptions about the social impacts of racial stereotyping on same-race and different-race groups that had been made in the textual and content analysis literature, as well as evaluate the efficacy of the “interpretive community” framework.

The recruitment strategy for the focus groups followed this logic, as noted above, but a biographical questionnaire used in the study also verified the participants’ own sense of their racial identity using Fuller’s (1992) method from her
cross-cultural survey of the *Cosby Show* that put “race” as an open-ended question. In this manner, the participants’ own responses guided the process of racial identification in the study and facilitated comparisons between the two targeted populations. In the event, the majority (n=11) of participants in the “black” group identified themselves as “black” and only three offered other explanations (“African-American,” “Trinidad and Tobago,” “Trinidadian/Canadian/Black”). By comparison, none of the “non-black” group identified themselves as “black” and most reported either their national background (for example, “Greek,” “Greek-Canadian,” “Filipino,” “French,” “Israeli”) or race and nationality (for example, “East Indian,” “Chinese”). Five (of 23) used the term “white” or “Caucasian” exclusively to describe themselves and three more used “white” in combination with their nationality (“white Irish,” “white Polish”). By recruiting both groups of participants from similar income areas, we were able to compare interpretive strategies for groups from similar social strata and who shared a common interest in watching televised basketball, but occupied a different “social location” with respect to their racial identities and experiences. We were attentive to the possibility of intra-group disagreements (race-based or otherwise) which might emerge and were sensitive to the limitations and complexities of “categorizing” individuals according to their racial identities (or any other personal attributes) (for a discussion of social determinism and audience research, see Jhally & Lewis, 1992).

The rationale for configuring race in the study as a dimension of subjective social experience (rather than an “objectively verifiable” condition) was to isolate racial experience from other factors that might influence youth’s reception, adaptation, and use of the dramatic narratives found in the commercials. This rationale guided the selection of the population in Toronto to comprise a black group from a major black community in Canada, and the population in Vancouver to constitute a comparison group who lacked significant personal experience with African-Americans, African-Canadians, and Caribbean-Canadians. In hindsight, it would have been useful to recruit comparison groups in both cities (a non-black group in Toronto and a black group in Vancouver) so that the two urban contexts could also be compared. The value of comparing the cities was not clear to us at the time, however, in part as a consequence of our focus on the “interpretive community” concept itself and our perceived need to isolate two distinct “interpretive communities” based on racial experience and context.

We elected to use focus group methodology on the understanding that “directed” interaction among individuals in a group context can bring out ideas and points of view that would not come out in casual conversation (ethnography) or in one-to-one interviewing (Morgan, 1988). Also, to study “group” culture and “group” reactions to and interpretations of media texts, it is preferable to observe these interpretations in a group setting. Focus group research is also preferable to structured survey research for deriving understandings and interpretations that could not be discovered without interaction among peers and probing by the interviewer. The small focus group approach was modeled after Jhally & Lewis’s
All of the focus group sessions conducted in this study were approximately one hour in length. The sessions were videotaped as unobtrusively as possible (fixed camera) and were held in locations that were intended to be comfortable for the participants. Two sessions were conducted in participants’ homes, four were in “out-of-the-way” classrooms in high schools, and one session was held in a school lounge. Although these circumstances did not completely simulate the subject’s situation watching television at home in a “natural setting” (Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986), by having a group of friends together watching and discussing the commercials in a comfortable environment, even with the presence of a researcher and a video camera, a sufficiently informal atmosphere was created for study purposes.

Two moderators were used in the research. A white interviewer led the non-black groups in Vancouver, and a black interviewer led the black groups in Toronto. This approach was based on Jhally & Lewis’s (1992) method in studying the Cosby Show, where same-race moderators were used to ease the discomfort people might feel talking about race. According to Jhally & Lewis, the strategy was clearly validated in their transcript analysis, which revealed several race-oriented comments that, in their assessment, would not have been made in the presence of a different-race moderator.

Comments gained from the videotaped sessions and from a response questionnaire that was filled out before the discussion (where participants were asked to “tell the story” of each commercial after viewing it) were transcribed for analysis. The transcript was supplemented by additional analyst observations about the group interview, including non-verbal communication, gestures, and behavioural responses. The availability of the raw videotape footage allowed for easy reference and analysis of “what took place.” Ethnographic and content analysis methodologies were used to analyze the cumulative focus group data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The limitations and assumptions inherent to this sort of research are well stated by Jhally & Lewis (1992) in the preface to their book:

Establishing connections between attitudes and perceptions is technically difficult and demanding. It is a little like a trial in which the jury can only reconstruct events from evidence and testimony presented to it after the fact. So it is with this kind of investigative audience research inasmuch as we cannot perch inside people’s brains and watch ideas and opinions forming. Like the prudent jury, we must use our knowledge and skill to interpret what people tell us rather than accept all testimony at face value. (p. 9)

Results
Distinct, racially based themes emerged during the interviews that revealed the complexity of the youths’ understandings of and opinions about race. These themes developed in conjunction with group discussions about race portrayals in television and about the participants’ own perceptions of and experiences with
A number of key points were made in response to two of the six previewed television commercials. Although the athletic apparel commercials are not an essential focus of this paper, these two warrant a brief explanation and description here because they prompted some of the most differentiated responses between groups.

The two commercials were taken from a series of Nike “Barber Shop” segments that showed various NBA players (all black) “hanging out” in a barber shop, talking and laughing. One showed NBA star Chris Webber and his teammate (at the time) Latrell Sprewell joking and reminiscing about a well-known “slam dunk” that Webber had done “on” Charles Barkley in an NBA game. The commercial ended with Webber joking that Barkley told him after the dunk that he (Webber) was his role model, an ironic statement since Barkley is well known for public statements suggesting that athletes have no responsibility to be role models for kids, and also because Webber, at the time, was a first-year NBA player and Barkley was an established veteran. A viewer with background knowledge of Chris Webber would associate his “trash talk” and “attitude” with his former college team at the University of Michigan where he played with a trend-setting flamboyant group of players known as the “Fab Five.” The other commercial emphasized the importance of “style” in basketball performance, as former and present NBA players “hung out” in the barber shop, talking about the well-known “finger roll” basketball move used to perfection by “NBA legend” George “Ice Man” Gervin. The other commercials shown to the participants were by Reebok, Footlocker, and Starter, as well as another Nike commercial (unrelated to the barber shop series). All six commercials were mentioned by the participants; however, it was the perceived “realism” of the “Barber Shop” commercials that seemed to elicit the most response.

The research findings are presented in two sections. First, responses to questions about the realism of the previewed athletic footwear commercials and the realism of television portrayals of blacks overall are examined. Second, the youths’ experiences with race and opinions about race issues in society are explored. Although a distinction is made in context between media perceptions and everyday life, the participants’ accounts of media messages and their own life experiences often overlapped and frequently were characterized by multiple opinions, perspectives, and understandings, often within the same statement. Underlying the various themes and subthemes that one finds in these statements, however, are recurrent patterns of similarity and difference in how the participants respond as black and non-black basketball enthusiasts. These similarities and differences in part constitute the two groups as distinct interpretive communities and are emphasized in the discussion that follows.
genuine concern about the potentially negative impacts that these portrayals of blacks have on a white audience. The non-black groups were uncertain about black portrayal realism, and noted their inexperience with “real-life” blacks. These distinct understandings are the basis of the following thematic discussion of the differentiated perceptions of black portrayals.

**Theme 1 (black youth): Sport identities & stereotypes—”I definitely like the trash talking. . . . It was shown in the ghetto, like that's where black people play ball or whatever.”** The black participants’ identification with and criticisms of black portrayals were especially evident in discussions about the portrayal of blacks in athletic apparel commercials. Although the black participants generally recognized the high proportion of stereotypical black portrayals in television programming and advertising, they still tended to identify with the black athletes in the apparel commercials and to emphasize “the realism” of the commercials. This was the dominant trend in all groups. For instance, several participants described how their peer group was similar to the celebrity athletes in the Nike “Barber Shop” commercials:

you know like in the commercials, like the George Gervin finger roll one, or the Chris Webber (one) [the Nike commercials described above]. You know the way they just sit back, and the way they are talking about things. I know these guys like to a lot too [refers to other participants]. I know lots of times me and “Marcus,” we’ll be chillin’ out and say “remember back that time when I made that move” [pretends to be making a basketball “move” with his arms], just brought it in and swung it here like that, man. Oh man, the way they talk, reminiscing.

especially the one's . . . where they're in the barber shop . . . that is as close to reality as you're going to get. I know a lot of people do that [other participants nod heads]. Everybody does that, sit back, exaggerate.

The participants also recognized stereotypical aspects of these commercials:

I mean like, in the Barber Shop, it's kind of like a stereotype too, like when you see all these guys [blacks] sitting in a barber shop, doing nothing.I noticed a lot of the commercials [athletic apparel], they revolve around the city, like the urban areas and associating with youth. That's where the youths hang out, blacks. They make a whole set of links.

Descriptions of a Footlocker athletic apparel commercial shown during the session (that featured predominantly black high-school and college-aged athletes playing basketball in what appeared to be an inner city, ghetto playground) reinforced this theme.

they're kids our age, that's how we play on the court the Footlocker one, with all the guys playing basketball. Like you see them all dressed up. Like wearing jeans. When you play basketball, you wear shorts, you don't wear a vest and big clothes to go play basketball.

These comments showing an identification (“that's how we play”) and a recognition of stereotyping (“it was shown in the ghetto . . . like that's where black
people play ball”) were made regularly in all black groups in discussions about black athlete depictions in athletic apparel commercials.

Other comments about black portrayals in television programming and in other kinds of commercials were far more critical than those regarding the athletic apparel commercials. All groups recognized (without disagreement) that the types of roles that blacks appear in on television are limited.

You won’t ever see any black person with a book. There’s always got to be a ball in his hand, some kind of ball. Football, baseball, basketball. Always look at every show, if someone’s a criminal—black guy, black guy. [other participant continues] look at most of the black shows, they’re all comedies. [other participant] you don’t see like L.A. Law. the TV tells black people that all we can do is play basketball and we can do sports. But there are a lot of black people that you don’t hear anything about that are doctors and lawyers that also do really good jobs, and you never hear anything about it.

Other participants reinforced these views in discussions about black portrayals in news broadcasts and “true to life” crime shows (that show actual arrests and police actions):

In shows like COPS [a police show documenting “real-life” police actions], you see arrested black people. Every time you see them arresting black people, a black person, a black person or a Latino, something like that. You always get a cameraman hopping in a car, and there’s a black person they’re chasing. I mean, not everybody, not every call you get is going to be a black person. I mean, black people aren’t the only people that commit crime. I know a lot of white guys that commit crime. But you never see that on TV. And that’s another portrayal problem. All in sports or commit crimes.

Some participants commented on the stereotypical depictions of blacks as living in the “ghetto” and expressed concern that these portrayals give blacks a negative image:

the Footlocker one . . . maybe change it to a bit higher class neighbourhood and have more people, more colours, not just black people running around. Because you could also look at it from another point of view that they’re just running around causing mischief or whatever, and that’s the way black people are. A lot of people think that. Like just walking around here, you see a lot of people looking at you thinking “what are you going to do today.”

there’s a lot of stuff you see on TV and they are showing us as “this is the way black people are.” Every five minutes you hear somebody else on the news go “that guy from Jamaica just killed someone.” But that’s not the whole story. I think the few people, black people, race, cause doubt . . . they do something stupid like that, so, stuff like that, it really gives us an image.

Evident from these comments are the concerns of black participants’ about how white people are impacted by stereotypical depictions of blacks (“it gives us an image,” “people looking at you thinking ‘what are you going to do today’”).

Theme 2 (black youth): Dream versus reality of ”making it in sport”—``You can’t always idolize a basketball player. Because if you think about it, what
is your percentage of making it to the NBA. It's not very high, right?" The apparent realism of the commercials for the black participants and their identification with celebrity athletes stood in contradistinction to their thoughts about “making it” to the NBA. Media imagery and hype aside, the lure of social success through sport was generally not as persuasive as anticipated by research (Wenner, 1994; Wonsek, 1992). Most participants (in all groups, with no disagreements) had a measured sense of their own abilities and recognized the implausibility of their “making it” to the NBA. At the same time, however, many of them acknowledged that the “dream” of “making it” persists, despite their awareness to the contrary.

One participant expressed this feeling explicitly:

because for me personally, I know right now, I'm looking into working with kids and stuff. This is my last year, but my number one, a lot of people tell me I'm crazy, I'm tripping, I'll never make it. But one of my dreams, honestly, is to go to the NBA. I'm not saying when I go to college or whatever. Maybe I'll finish college or university, and I'll be 26 or 25 having my job. But I still have a dream, man.

Other participants were less emphatic about “the dream,” although the desire to “make it” remained embedded in their comments:

at least give it a decent try, but I don't know how many of us will be actually disappointed if we don't. We might be disappointed, but it won't be the end of the road you got to use your head. That's why all those NBA players say stay in school... They're saying don't single everything out and just have basketball.

Ironically, the interest of some of the participants in playing professional basketball appeared to stem from their identification with the celebrity athletes and the athletic apparel commercials, even while, as a group, they were critical of the “false hopes” that are created by some athletic apparel commercials. The following critical comments about media stereotypes were typical:

You never hear about the educational aspect, like the ones [blacks] that go to college, all you hear about is the sports stars. It's really like a role model, the doctor, someone that's a more realistic goal than being a basketball player. And that should be more a role model on TV than basketball players and stuff like that. You can't always idolize a basketball player. Because if you think about it, what is your percentage of making it to the NBA. It's not very high, right. Because if you think, oh, why not be a basketball player, and set your mind to it, not everybody can be a basketball player. Some people are just not made to be basketball players. It's kind of like blinding kids to other things. There are other things in life bigger than basketball. Life is bigger than basketball. It's kind of like leading people toward that message that basketball is everything.

Overall, the black participants as a group were critical of the prospects for social mobility through sport (even those who aspired to “the dream” of making it to the NBA) and did not appear to be “deceived” by these commercials into thinking that professional sport was a realistic aspiration.

Theme 3 (non-black youth): Social distances & differences—“black people are more 'What's up baby,' stuff like that. And white folk are more down to earth."
Unlike the black participants, who were very aware of how blacks are portrayed on television, the non-black participants in all groups (with no notable exceptions) appeared to be less mindful of the portrayal of blacks in television programming. This is not to say the non-black youth did not have perceptions and opinions, but overall their comments were less comprehensive and less developed than those of the black participants. In each non-black group, a few participants volunteered explicit comments to which the other group members reacted (often non-verbally). Although only a few comments were made in each case, there was little disagreement among the participants once the remarks were made.

Black people [on television] are more “what's up baby,” stuff like that. And white folk are more down to earth.[in response to the question, “What are blacks like on TV?”] like the tough guy, the gangster, the homie. Like I guess if you're a black kid and you see all this on TV, it's like “that's what I should [do], then I should talk like this and have a gun and stuff.” Some of them do, but some of them don't I guess.

Unlike the black participants, who appeared to have thought about this subject previously, the non-black participants as a group could only think of a few examples outside of sport where blacks were shown. The subject of black depictions appeared to be unimportant to the non-black participants and, moreover, the participants seemed to absorb the stereotypic black portrayals offered in television advertising and other television programming in non-critical ways.

Insights into how black television portrayals “informed” the non-black participants could be gained from their discussions about how portrayals of blacks on television compared to their perceptions of “real-life” blacks. When asked about their previous experience with blacks, most participants in all groups indicated that they knew only a few blacks, and had little exposure to them:

I don't really know any black people. That's the sad thing though . . . we don't have any black people here [other participant continues] ya, we've got one black guy in our school,[other participant continues] I've got three or four in my neighbourhood.

Within this context, the non-black discussions about the realism of black portrayals are insightful into the impacts of the media. Few comments were made regarding the realism of black portrayals (or potential stereotypes) until the participants were asked specifically “how portrayals of blacks on television compare to ‘real-life’ blacks.” Most participants in non-black groups (there were no notable disagreements) saw black portrayals in athletic apparel commercials to be quite realistic:

[referring to the realism of the Footlocker commercial] ya, that's what it's like.[other participant continues] sometimes that's what it's like.[other participant continues] it's like that a lot in the States. I've been to the States. It's like that down there. Very old style gyms with the lettering, trash talking.[other participant continues] more inside play, inside moves on the outdoor courts.
One group supported the realism of the Footlocker commercial when they were asked if it would have made a difference if white basketball players were in the commercials instead of black players:

it really couldn't have been [white basketball players] because they were doing cool dunks.[other participant continues] they were on the street, playing streetball and stuff [the black athletes]. I don't know and it just, you just don't picture it as much.[other participant continues] portrayed ghetto style.[other participant continues] we can afford to build gyms in our neighbourhoods.

These participants appeared to see the portrayal of black athletes in the inner city, playing a distinct “style” of basketball, to be realistic. Although some participants recognized that not all blacks play this style in this setting, this did not make the commercial any less believable.

Non-black participants in all groups (with no disagreements) also felt that the portrayal of black celebrities in the Nike “barber shop” commercials were realistic:

the barber shop is more like black, because they always talk, like.[other participant continues] it looked like they were in a black neighbourhood.[other participant continues] in the barber shop, they all exaggerate about how they are good and stuff; that's true.

The participants did not refer to stereotyping in any of the Nike commercials. They appeared to be comfortable with these “barber shop” portrayals of blacks, suggesting that white people would not have “fit” into this setting.

In two of the four non-black groups, participants recognized likely stereotypes in their own perceptions of black portrayals in other television programming. Although there was no overt disagreement in these groups, most did not comment on this subject or make supportive remarks or gestures. In all non-black groups, discussion of black portrayal realism was characterized by feelings of uncertainty:

[in response to “do you learn anything about blacks from the shows”] you get an image of how it is, but you don't really know, so it's kind of twisted.[other participant continues] they seem so much different than us.[other participant continues] they are so much different than us.

I guess you pick up stereotypes from TV or whatever. Not everyone’s like that.

One group referred to a phrase out of the movie White Men Can't Jump (a movie about a white basketball player and black basketball player “hustling” basketball for money) that they perceived to be true for “real life” black athletes:

Remember in the movie White Men Can’t Jump, when that white guy says that black guys would rather lose--look good and lose [other participants nod]. . . . I think it's true. Black guys would rather lose, but still look really good.[other participant continues] ya.[other participant continues] it's hard to say, for all those black guys.[other participant continues] the majority, I think the majority.
Overall, the statements made by non-black participants demonstrated a level of uncertainty about the realism of black portrayals in television programming. Some explained that they “didn’t know” how realistic the portrayals of blacks were because of their limited exposure to blacks. Others spoke tentatively, as though they were talking about a subject they were generally unfamiliar with. In all cases, the participants did not appear to have sufficient experience with blacks to have an informed opinion about the realism and/or stereotypical nature of black portrayals in the media, and the opinions they gave often seemed to be ineluctably informed by these same media portrayals.

**Section 2: Everyday perceptions of difference**

During the focus group interviews, a second group of themes emerged that reflected distinct understandings of race and racism in the participants’ own lives and in society at large. Evident in the black and non-black adolescents’ responses were perceptions of difference between black people and white people, and underlying this theme was the place of television as a contributor to these understandings. The adolescents’ comments about their experiences with and understandings of race and racial difference (in the context of discussions about race and sport) thus help to shed light on how media perceptions of blacks potentially contribute to “real life” perceptions.

**Theme 4 (black youth): Living with racism—“Sometimes I go, ‘Damn, do you think white people like me?’”**

Black participants generally showed an acute awareness of racism in society. Although the question “Do you think racism is a problem in society?” was asked in all sessions, opinions and perceptions were offered freely by the black participants throughout the interviews, and not only in response to this question. This was particularly evident in discussions about celebrity black athletes, where the black youth suggested that outside of sport and entertainment, blacks are not respected in comparison to whites. One participant’s experience on a “night out” illustrates this sentiment:

I was at a pool hall and the guy [white person] goes, “Michael Jordan, he's the best player and he's so good” and all this. But he respects Michael Jordan as a basketball player. I don't think he respects Michael Jordan as a person, he's like “I like Jordan as a black basketball player,” but that's it, because he's entertaining that guy at the pool hall. And that's why he doesn't say, “Michael Jordan's a good person,” the way he might look at a white singer or dancer or President or something. It's like black people are just there for show and once the show's over . . . . I don't think guys are going to go twenty years from now and say, “ya, Michael Jordan's a good guy, you know, I want him to represent me in politics.” It's like . . . “what are you doing for me,” and Michael Jordan's in commercials, and with this guy [the white person from the pool hall], it's cool, but as soon as the show is over and then the next black guy comes up and it's his show.

Other participants reinforced this idea, suggesting that blacks are viewed only as entertainers:
they're [white people] using us for sports man . . . when they go to a Blue Jays game or the NBA, they wear their suit and tie, the same way they're going to a ballet. They don't care if it's black people or Italians . . . All those white people that go watch basketball, how many of them have black boyfriends, how many of them are married to black people, none.

like O. J. Simpson. How many people are turning on O. J. now. “I love O. J., go O. J.”—now it’s like that black guy murdered two white people, his white wife. People are turning on him. But when he was running the football, everyone was cheering for him.

These comments show that some black participants felt white people have a limited appreciation and understanding of black experience, a deficiency that was encouraged by media selectivity and bias as well as by underlying racial prejudices in society. This interpretation is supported by the participants’ suggestion that white people support blacks as entertainers, but will not let them into their personal lives (“How many of them are married to black people? None.”) or stand by them in difficult circumstances (“I love O. J., go O. J. . . . people are turning on him”).

Participants elaborated on this idea in discussions about how blacks are restricted in other areas of employment that are not related to sport or entertainment:

a selected few people have a life after basketball. Like how many people can you think of that move on after basketball. The only person I can think of right now is Isiah Thomas [former NBA player who, at the time of the research, was general manager and vice-president of the Toronto Raptors NBA basketball team], and he is still linked to the one thing he does best which is basketball. He's still an entertainer and all that stuff.

with all those commercials [the athletic apparel commercials shown in the research session], even though there is like a lot of black people doing the commercials, behind all the commercials, you know, is like a white producer, a white filmer behind the camera, a white director, a white person from Nike.

Some participants spoke about stereotypes that stigmatize blacks in everyday life:

pager [for a white person], lawyer, doctor. Black man pager—drug dealer, cause he has a gold chain on, or gold rings, shades on or something. It's stupid. It's a stereotype. Stereotype for two things, sports and criminals. That's all black people are stereotyped for.

Overall, the black participants had strong perceptions of how white people see black people. Many of these perceptions seemed to be drawn from stereotypical portrayals of blacks in the media, portrayals that were believed by these participants to “lead white people to see blacks stereotypically.”

Furthermore, one participant described how stereotypical sport role models are restrictive for blacks and could negatively affect a black person’s self-esteem.
hockey, that’s more towards white people. If you keep seeing that, that will kind of make you in the back of your mind think, “I cannot do that, I cannot go any farther. I can’t do anything about it, it’s too late. Like, it doesn’t matter what I’m doing because it’s already toward the white person, so I have to take a back seat” . . . it just puts you down mentally, so you think, “because I’m black, I can’t do this at all.”

Although not all of the black youth spoke of these feelings explicitly, the comments that were made tended to be positively received. These comments reflect a general belief that racism towards blacks is perpetuated by stereotypical portrayals of blacks on television, a place where blacks are rarely (if ever) shown playing hockey, a white-dominated sport in Canada with higher status than basketball.

Some participants felt that white athletes are “preferred” by the media and the white audience. This sentiment was manifested in comments about player recruitment and media treatment of black and white professional basketball players:

if they had a white guy who is as good as Michael Jordan, he’d be on TV more than Michael Jordan was. He’d be everything. Look, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson [former white and black basketball stars]. They were even. To white people and most of the world, they were both popular. Bird got a lot of publicity, and his skills were, I don’t think as good as Magic’s. . . . Look at other sports, man, like baseball. You know they’ve got good black athletes, but as soon as one white athlete’s really good, they prop him up so much, because, you know, everybody has a little bit of racism.

look at Christian Laetner [white NBA player]. Laetner was good in college. We know he’s not that good. But they worshipped him because he’s a white guy . . . pretty, he’s like a brainer student. He’s a model, they loved him. He was white.

This opinion, while notable, was not typical of the views expressed by the black groups. The disparity over this issue (racism in sport) within the groups was concentrated in discussions about the changes in societal attitudes towards race. Although a few participants felt more positively that “times are changing,” most others were more critical. However, these differences were mainly over the extent of racism in sport; the existence of racism itself was not questioned.

The black participants also discussed how race and racism impacted their own lives. While no specific incidents of racial discrimination were reported (they were not asked to identify any), they described their relationships with white people in some detail, and explained how their experiences as black people were racially circumscribed:

sometimes people, even myself, let’s say I want to go work at some place. To me, if I want to work at that place, to me acting as a black person you have to be very conscious of what you do. And any little thing you do comes back, whereas you compare races, you’re gone, just like that. He might be a little more patient with a white person. Sometimes I go, “damn, do you think white people like me?”[other participant continues] I know white people go “damn.”[another participant continues sentence, still pretending to speak as a white person] “look at that black guy.” [another participant continues sentence,
still pretending to speak as a white person] “Negroes.” [another participant continues sentence, still pretending to speak as a white person] “look at them hide in the gym. Look at them walk around like they're better than everybody else.” Everybody has that.

In related discussions on portrayals of blacks, participants made similar assertions that white people, whose attitudes have been reinforced by deceptive television portrayals of blacks, saw blacks stereotypically and, as a result, tended to treat blacks differently from whites in day-to-day life. These findings reinforce the underlying theme that racism is a part of daily reality for these black adolescents, and that television forms a backdrop to and appears to contribute to their lived conditions of racism.

Theme 5 (non-black youth): Racism as a distant reality—“There's still racism up here, but I don't think as much as the States.” The non-black participants (all groups) indicated they had little personal experience with racism themselves, but were aware of incidents of racism in their schools and in society at large. These perceptions were markedly different from those expressed by the black participants, who saw race and racism to be a fundamental part of their everyday lives. In three of the four non-black groups, participants noted that racism in Canada was a problem, but that it was different from the “black-white problem” that was perceived to exist in the United States (one group commented on racism, but did not make the Canada-United States comparison):

the States has a greater black population, so it's more black. So that's their problem. And here it's Oriental, mostly, and Filipino and stuff. So it could be different, but it's the same, still.

I think it's more of an immigrant problem now. A lot of people are kind of getting frustrated with all the immigration that is happening.

These comments showed that the participants were aware of racism in Canada, but had limited personal experience with it. The Asian, East Indian, and Israeli participants in the non-black groups did not indicate that racism was a problem for them, although the racially mixed environment of their group may have impeded discussion. Other participants (in two groups) did not see racism as a serious social problem. Most participants demonstrated uncertainty about the subject of race and racism in Canada.

I don't think there's a problem. Sometimes, once in a while in basketball you get mad at each other. You might say a racist remark or something, in basketball. I don't know in society and stuff.

A few participants were comparatively more aware of race and racism:

we just had a fight here last week, and it was racial. It's getting out of hand because races can't get along with one another. there's a lot of different cultures in Vancouver. [other participant continues] sometimes they just clash.

One non-black group raised the issue of “racism” towards whites in their discussion of the use of blacks in athletic apparel commercials. This group did not
think it was fair that blacks should be overrepresented in a commercial type, when whites are condemned for the same thing in other instances. There was clear acceptance of this idea amongst most group members during this discussion (including both Asian and East Indian participants in the group).

if it [the athletic apparel commercial] was all white people, everyone would be considered racist.[other participant continues] when it's black people, it's love for their race. When it's white people, it's like racist.

These comments show varying levels of awareness of race and racism in Vancouver by these participants. Although some participants described specific instances of racism they had seen, most participants did not appear to be personally affected. The Asian and East Indian participants agreed with most comments, and were clearly integrated into the sessions. The comments regarding racism towards whites by one group seemed to be indicative of the participants’ limited exposure to and understanding of racism, and limited tolerance to anything that appears “anti-white.” Generally, the participants appeared to be aware of local problems associated with racism in Vancouver, but were unaware of larger issues of race and racism, including those that involved blacks.

Inherent in most discussions (in all non-black groups) that dealt with race and racial differences was the idea that blacks and whites are culturally and physically very different. Identified differences were usually explained with reference to basketball, a familiar context for these participants. The groups explained “style” differences between black and white basketball players in two ways. They referred to the actual basketball playing “style” of black and white players, as well as the “style” associated with on-court behaviour, such as the verbal taunting of opponents known as “trash talking.” Non-black participants (in all groups) suggested that blacks are better “natural” athletes, and some referred to cultural differences between blacks and whites.

their body is like, they can get a lot of height and stuff. Like you can’t see Larry Bird [former white basketball star] dunking on Michael Jordan and stuff like that.

Blacks are more athletic, usually, there are some athletic white guys.[other participant continues] I think black people are naturally more athletic.

Cultural explanations emphasized social context:

they [blacks] are more aggressive, like New York is just more aggressive. So I guess if you had a really talented white guy growing up in New York, he’d be just as aggressive, but it is predominantly black, so, you know the black guys they are aggressive.

The notion that blacks are part of a racially distinct culture had wide support.

I would say black guys are more concerned with arguing and looking good, more concerned with looking good and arguing with each other, and getting their two bits in.[other participants continue] ya, like if you've been down to Kits Beach [a basketball “hot spot” in Vancouver], and you see a one man show all the time.[other participant continues] you play for two minutes, someone
gets fouled and you argue for twenty, and they don't pass it to you if you're white. They are so much different than us.

A few participants suggested that there is very little difference between blacks they know in Vancouver and themselves. These comments were not typical of the non-black groups, and were expressed as an “aside” to the main flow of the discussion.

nice guys, they're just normal guys. Actually, I know a lot of black people who play [basketball] just the exact same way [as white players].

Despite these comments, most participants, even those who made assertions about the similarities between blacks and non-blacks, gave more elaborate statements in other parts of the interview describing how “real life” blacks play basketball differently than themselves and how “black style” and “black culture” are distinct from their own culture. Comments describing the similarities between blacks and whites seemed to be exceptions to the predominant trend, a trend that shows non-black participants to perceive cultural and physical differences between blacks and themselves. This has particular significance with respect to media impacts given the participants acknowledged inexperience with blacks.

Theoretical implications
These findings contribute to our understanding of the impacts of racial portrayals in the media on youth audiences in a number of ways. In bold terms, they show that youth audiences are not homogeneous but are constituted as distinct interpretive groups (“interpretive communities”) in terms of their cultural affinities and interpretive competencies as related to their social locations and cultural and racial identities and affinities. The black and non-black groups differed significantly in their racial experiences and in their appreciations and interpretations of the portrayals of blacks on television. While there were sometimes disagreements within groups on certain issues, for the most part, common themes emerged. Peer influence might have played a part in this agreement, but the moderators were careful to solicit remarks from all individuals and the minor disagreements that were evident suggest that at least some respondents were not inhibited from disagreeing with their peers. The findings also demonstrate that the media constitute an important component in the racial context and racial socialization of youth. Media portrayals were seen to affect youth racial perceptions and understandings and to frame their lived day-to-day experiences and their own racial identities. As foreseen, several of the findings offer new insights into the research reviewed in this paper. We have identified five contributions of this work.

First, in general terms, the findings confirm that the impact of media portrayals is more interactive (dialogical) than anticipated by much of present theory. Notable was the black participants’ belief that the high number of stereotypical portrayals of blacks in the media “give blacks an image” and impact the way others (specifically white people) perceive them as blacks. This finding reflects a “dialogue” between the text and the audience and contrasts sharply with the less interactive “effects” and cultivation models that show black portrayals to impact
unilaterally on the self-esteem of black adolescents (McDermott & Greenberg, 1984). In this instance, the black portrayals did not appear to affect self-esteem so much as to reinforce the reality of a racist society for these youth. These, and similar findings, imply that stereotypically negative portrayals of blacks have a broader potential range of impacts on black adolescent audiences than previously theorized, and that negative self-esteem is but one potential consequence of such portrayals. Similarly, this finding that blacks are critical of the types of black portrayals on television extends Faber, O’Guinn, & Meyer’s (1987) suggestion that heavy-viewing blacks are aware of and critical of the number of blacks shown on television. Other plausible impacts are that black youth learn what the dominant culture thinks about black culture and that they are systematically reminded of the racial prejudices of their social context. This is not to say that these media depictions are an accurate reflection of how non-black people “really feel” about black people, only that, from the standpoint of the black youth who watch these shows, they constitute one, highly visible instance of these feelings.

A second point concerns the media’s impact on racial awareness in youth lacking direct experience with depicted racial groups. The non-black participants in the study either found the portrayals of black athletes in television to be realistic, or indicated they could not evaluate the realism because of their inexperience with blacks. In either case, the participants’ inability to describe what “real life” blacks were like in any other terms than what they had seen on television or on the basketball court suggests that the media at least played a part in “informing” these non-black adolescents about black people. This supports Jhally & Lewis’s (1992) research on white audience reactions to black portrayals in the Cosby Show and, in particular, their suggestion that the line between the television world and the world beyond the screen has, for most people, become exceedingly hazy. These findings also reinforce the popular theorization (particularly from the “media effects” tradition) that black television portrayals offer new information to a predominantly white or, in this case, non-black audience that has little previous experience with or information about blacks. However, it would be presumptuous to make any specific (and overly deterministic) claims about the “linearity” and directness of this informational process. Here again, the dialogical nature of the audience-media interaction forces us to view unilateral postulations with some suspicion. How audiences respond to the media remains as much an empirical question as a theoretical one and can only be addressed through continued audience research.

A third contribution of the findings is in the area of racial stereotyping. The interviews showed that the non-black participants felt that they (as non-blacks) were very different from the black athletes in the commercials. They made specific references to “the way they (the black athletes) talked” and to the black athletes’ distinct basketball “style.” These findings sustain the notion described in “experimental” studies that stereotypical portrayals of blacks appear to reinforce stereotypical beliefs about blacks in a non-black audience. The non-black participants’ recollection of blacks on television in few roles other than that of “athlete”
also support two of Wonsek’s (1992) hypotheses: first, that the portrayal of blacks during televised basketball broadcasts may “perpetuate the image of young black male(s) as athlete only” and, second, that stereotypical black athlete portrayals reinforce perceived differences between blacks and whites (p. 460). Although our results neither confirm nor deny her proposition that audiences infer from these portrayals that blacks are “naturally” inferior, the findings reflect the non-black participants’ belief that blacks are “naturally” more athletic. These are important findings considering that Wonsek’s postulations about the black athlete (similar to those of Andrews, 1996; Cole & Denny, 1994; Lule, 1995; McKay, 1995; Wenner, 1994; Wilson, 1997) are based on content/textual analysis research, not audience research.

Fourth, our findings do not support theories that black athlete media portrayals reinforce “the myth of social mobility through sport” for a black audience (Wenner, 1994; Wonsek, 1992). Although some black participants described their desire to become a professional basketball player, like the sport stars in the commercials, all participants recognized the barriers faced by those who aspired to be a professional athlete and did not expect to “make it.” Nevertheless, several factors stand to limit the generalizability of these findings. The black participants were relatively well off economically (generally middle class), and it makes sense that less well-to-do youth with fewer opportunities for social mobility might have different interpretations and understandings of these portrayals (see Messner, 1991). Second, although American sports coverage is pervasive in Canada, the relative underemphasis on social mobility through sport in Canada may undermine youth socialization into the “American sports dream” in comparison with the American case. We can only claim, therefore, that the results of the present study amend Wonsek’s and Wenner’s theorizations by showing that the myth of social mobility, while reinforced somewhat by the celebrity black athlete, is not necessarily interpreted literally by all black adolescent male audiences, particularly in other national contexts.

A fifth contribution is in the area of perceived racial equality. The reactions of the non-black participants to non-stereotypical portrayals of blacks demonstrate the importance of taking into account the intertextual nature of communication as well as the dialogical nature of the text-audience interaction. Although the non-black participants in this study were accepting of their black peers and certainly viewed blacks as human beings (Lewis, 1991), we emphasize that their admiration for the black athlete’s basketball prowess and their precarious recognition that “not all blacks” are like television blacks were embedded within an overriding understanding of “naturalized” racial differences between blacks and whites (such as blacks’ “natural” athletic ability). Their overall understandings of racial differences, therefore, militated against their challenging, let alone deconstructing, racial inequality. The non-black participants’ lack of knowledge about racial discrimination against blacks and the concerns of some participants about “racism” against whites suggest that in some instances non-blacks may perceive the portrayals of black celebrity athletes as evidence of social equality, and the
overrepresentation of blacks in athletic apparel commercials as a form of “reverse racism.” However, to conclude that non-stereotypical portrayals unilaterally lead white viewers to a false assumption of social equality (“enlightened racism”) would be to misrepresent the contribution of these findings. The participants were, in fact, familiar with the kinds of racism they saw directed toward “immigrants” in Canada. The key finding here is that these understandings, together with the youth’s media-based knowledge of black culture and black athletes, would tend to operate intertextually to inform their opinions about the social position of blacks in Canadian society and about racism against blacks. It is likely, therefore, that these participants were comfortable with the depictions of black success in sport and were not led to address, critically or otherwise, the racial issues associated with this stereotype. The stereotype of the “black as athlete” is propagated, therefore, as much by the absence of its criticism as by its continued representation. Further, and although this paper does not focus on issues of Americanization or globalization (an issue we discussed more in depth in Wilson & Sparks, 1996, drawing on Appadurai, 1990), these findings provide insight into the ways that American-based discourses about race are modified on a local level. These modifications appear in this study to be related more to the differences between the areas in Vancouver and Toronto where these youth lived than to being part of an overriding “Canadian” culture.

As a final observation, these findings also have implications for research on gender and race in the media, particularly in light of the dramatic underrepresentation of black women in the media noted previously (see Dates, 1987; Rhodes, 1995). Black female celebrity athletes were conspicuously absent from the television programming and commercials sampled for this study, and women athletes were not mentioned within the focus groups. Although not specifically examined in this paper, it seems quite clear that the media impacts described in context contributed not only to the racial socialization of the youth audiences interviewed but also to their gender socialization as males within their respective racial communities. The racially marked cultural styles and identities portrayed in the television commercials were conjointly racially coded masculine styles and identities. An important question to ask, therefore, is how media portrayals of black athletes might impact upon gender relations and the social construction of gender within affected racial communities (both black and non-black). The discussion of O. J. Simpson by one of the black focus groups raises a threatening (to whites) racial stereotype of black masculinity that warrants further investigation, as does the broader issue of the interaction of gender stereotypes with racial stereotypes in media contexts (see Messner, 1991; Williams, 1994).

Practical considerations and conclusion
Our hope is that the findings from this study of audience reactions to black athletes might contribute to “informed challenges” to major television networks to broadcast racial stories in a more balanced and fair way instead of typecasting blacks as criminals, entertainers, or athletes (for more specific recommendations in this context, see Dyson, 1995; hooks, 1992; Bhally & Lewis, 1992). These find-
ings could also be used to support media literacy initiatives focused on developing critical skills in youth so that the differences between reality and television could be better identified and understood. Future studies that examine audience interpretations and experiences could be used to identify "at risk" media consumers as "interpretive communities" who, although possibly isolated geographically, might be efficiently and effectively reached through media channels through their shared affinities for sport. As much as text-based and content analysis research is important, audience research and media-related ethnographies provide a crucial means for validating the impacts of media contents and planning media interventions. In the absence of a continuing program of audience research, such practical innovations will remain based largely on speculative theory.

Notes
1. Henry (1994) compares these developments in Canada to those discussed by British author Gilroy (1987), who argued that the British media in the 1970s and particularly in the early 1980s interpreted black inner city crime to be "natural" expressions of black culture.
2. Another relevant model that developed out of the "effects" tradition, the "uses and gratifications" model, has been criticized for being overly functionalist in its focus on audience "needs," "wants," and "motivations" (Blumler & Katz, 1974; for a more developed version of the perspective, see Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmingreen, 1985).
3. Although there is an abundance of research on black male athlete portrayals (the focus of this section and largely the focus of the youth's discussions in the results section), there is comparatively little research on black female athletes (see Williams, 1994). Clearly, more content and textual analysis research as well as audience studies are required in this area.
4. For related work, see Andrews, 1996; Cole & Denny, 1994; Dyson, 1993; and Hutchison, 1996.
5. Census data was used to identify the ethnic makeup, education levels, occupations, and income levels of the neighbourhoods where the participants lived. The statistics showed that the black adolescents (Toronto) interviewed in this study lived in a middle- to upper-income area where the representation of black people was about 5% of the population compared to a majority of people of Anglo-European descent (Statistics Canada, 1991a). The non-black adolescents (Vancouver) also lived in and/or went to school in middle-income areas, but had only limited exposure to blacks. People of black origin made up less than 0.5% of the population in these areas compared to a majority of people with British or Chinese origin (Statistics Canada, 1991b).
6. This description also appears in a previous article by Wilson & Sparks (1996).
7. The questions used to guide the focus groups included: (a) Are these commercials realistic? (b) Would it make a difference if the athletes in the commercials were white? (c) Do you notice the race of the athletes in the commercials? and (d) Do you think that racism is a problem in society?
8. In describing these themes, "typical" comments are defined as those that were supported by "most" members of the noted groups. In other instances, if there was no disagreement within a group about a topic and a few comments appeared to represent the group's perceptions (if others nodded or gave affirmative words), these comments were considered "representative." "Other" comments were defined as those mentioned by one or more participants, but that were not indicative of the groups' sentiments.

References


