

# Navigating Stereotypical Audiovisual Content

*Qualitative Insights into the Necessity of Moral Disclaimers*

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## Samenvatting

*Omgaan met stereotiepe audiovisuele content. Kwalitatieve inzichten in de noodzaak van morele disclaimers*

Oudere films en series bevatten vaak stereotiepe weergaven van bijvoorbeeld gender en cultuur. Streamingdiensten plaatsen daarom steeds vaker morele disclaimers om de schadelijke impact hiervan te erkennen en bewustzijn te creëren. Dit onderzoek bestudeert of het publiek dergelijke disclaimers nodig vindt en waarom. De resultaten tonen redenen om morele disclaimers te accepteren, aan te passen of af te wijzen.

## Abstract

Older films and TV shows often feature stereotypical portrayals of gender, race, and culture. As awareness of their harmful impact increases, streaming platforms have begun adding moral disclaimers to acknowledge these issues, raise awareness, and encourage critical engagement. This study examines audience perceptions of such disclaimers, exploring their perceived necessity and underlying reasons. The qualitative findings highlight factors influencing the acceptance, modification, or rejection of moral disclaimers.

These insights can inform decisions on whether to include disclaimers and how to design them effectively.

**Keywords:** Moral disclaimer, stereotypical portrayal, films, TV shows, streaming platforms

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The significance of fostering diverse and inclusive representation in media has gained increasing attention in contemporary media productions, reflecting broader societal shifts and calls for more representative portrayals. However, stereotypical portrayals are still common, especially in older media content (e.g., films and television series) readily available through, for example, streaming platforms. According to cultivation theory, repeated exposure to stereotypical representations shapes and influences the audience's perceptions of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shrum, 2017). Research has further demonstrated the negative impact of stereotypical depictions of individuals – related to race, gender, culture, or socioeconomic status – on attitudes (Banas et al., 2020), person perception (Bijlstra et al., 2014; Mastro & Tropp, 2004), the perpetuation of discrimination (Zhang et al., 2023), and performance on cognitive tasks within members of the negatively portrayed group (Appel & Weber, 2017).

Early work on representation emphasizes that the media are not merely reflective of the world, but they actively construct meaning through symbolic systems (Hall, 1997; see also Carey, 1989). Representations, especially those that become common, play a significant role in shaping how people understand the world and perceive themselves and others. By doing so, stereotypes may help reinforce power structures and social inequalities. Building further on this foundation, Gray (2013) focuses specifically on the role of television in reproducing, challenging, or negotiating cultural meanings around race, identity, and social order. The author argues that how Black people – and other marginalized groups – are shown in the media is shaped by larger systems like business interests and social institutions. Such media representations are not fixed or neutral; they change over time depending on politics, public opinion, and shifting goals of the media industry. Therefore, stereotypical depictions in older movies and television shows should not simply be viewed as outdated or harmless relics of a different time. Instead, they function as cultural artifacts that continue to circulate, take on new

meanings, and influence public understanding today, particularly through their ongoing availability on platforms like Netflix and Disney+.

These older films and TV series featuring stereotypical portrayals, e.g., Disney classics such as *Peter Pan* and *Dumbo*, have long faced criticism for their stereotypical portrayals of gender, race, and culture (Tobwin et al., 2003). Criticism of such depictions is not limited to Disney classics. For instance, the beloved TV show *Friends* has faced criticism for its stereotypical portrayal of a transgender character (Percival, 2022), and a recent study by Tyree and Powell (2022) highlighted the persistent use of stereotypes in the depiction of African American women in TV shows.

In response to ongoing criticism and research demonstrating negative consequences of stereotypical representations, some organizations, e.g., Kijkwijzer and NPO, and streaming companies, e.g., Netflix and Disney, have started implementing content warnings (e.g., pictograms) or disclaimers explicitly acknowledging the presence of discrimination and stereotypes in such content. This suggests a shift toward media organizations becoming more self-aware and taking responsibility for the content they provide. Although content warnings are commonly used to prevent trauma responses in viewers or provide parental guidance by alerting viewers to sensitive, age-restricted material, or to signal the presence of stereotypes or discriminatory content (Charles et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2020), there is a growing use of disclaimers that go beyond merely cautioning viewers about the content. These disclaimers explicitly express a moral judgment, indicating that the content is perceived as ethically problematic by society and/or the broadcasting company. In this study, we refer to this specific type of disclaimer as a *moral disclaimer*. These moral disclaimers intend to do more than merely warn; they invite viewers to reflect critically with the stated goal to acknowledge harmful stereotypes, raise awareness, and foster dialog. This aligns with the idea of negotiated reading by encouraging audiences to question dominant meanings presented in the media content (films and TV series) rather than passively accept them (Hall, 1997).

Since raising awareness and engaging in dialog are key components in mitigating discrimination (Devine et al., 2012; Schmader et al., 2022), this type of disclaimer – one that goes beyond a simple warning about content by adding a moral statement – has the potential to contribute to addressing stereotypical content. However, research on other types of content warnings in media suggests their effectiveness remains debated (Bridgland et al., 2023).

Moreover, a study on moral disclaimers in controversial visual art (Jones et al., 2023) has shown that they can negatively impact esthetic appreciation while increasing negative emotions. A recent study showed how confronting fans of the movie *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939) with the movie's critiqued portrayal of slavery negatively affected their appreciation (Van den Haak et al., 2023). The authors demonstrated that being confronted with the controversial elements triggered ambivalence as participants sought to reconcile their love for the film with the accompanying critique. This indicates that audiences might accept, negotiate, or resist the intended meaning of a moral disclaimer, potentially affecting its intended effects.

To gain a better understanding of why and when moral disclaimers in the context of stereotypical content result in the intended effects, it is essential to first explore how viewers perceive and negotiate the meaning of these types of disclaimers. Do viewers regard them as necessary interventions? And what are the reasons for this? Gaining insight into these perceptions can contribute to ongoing discussions about the appropriateness, timing, and framing of such disclaimers. In addition to informing policy and practice, this study serves as a foundation for future research into the effects of moral disclaimers on key outcomes that broadcasters often cite as the reasons for their use, such as increasing awareness of stereotypes, fostering recognition of their harmful impact, and promoting a more inclusive society.

## The Current Study

The ongoing academic debate on the effectiveness of disclaimers underscores the high social and scientific relevance of exploring the impact of this new type of disclaimer. As part of a larger research project investigating the effects of moral disclaimers on stereotype awareness, movie appreciation, and reactance, this paper focuses on the qualitative part of this project in which it assesses whether and why moral disclaimers are perceived by the audience as necessary to address stereotypical content.

## Methodology

### Design and Participants

This paper is based on data from a larger research project that examines the effects of moral disclaimers addressing stereotypical audiovisual content

on stereotype awareness, movie appreciation, and reactance. The complete study, including research questions, methodology, and preregistration details, can be accessed on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/frzsy/overview>, Study 1). This paper focuses on the qualitative analysis of an open-ended question regarding the perceived necessity of the moral disclaimer. Accordingly, this paper only reports methodological details relevant to this aspect of the study.

Participants were recruited via the research platform Prolific and directed to a Qualtrics questionnaire. The sample consisted of 215 participants residing in the United Kingdom or the United States, who were native English speakers and over 18 years old (ranging from 19 to 73,  $M = 40$ ,  $SD = 12.29$ ). The gender distribution was slightly imbalanced between females ( $n = 134$ ) and males ( $n = 80$ ). One participant preferred not to disclose their gender. Most participants identified as White ( $n = 193$ ), followed by Asian ( $n = 12$ ), African American ( $n = 1$ ), mixed race ( $n = 7$ ), and participants who did not disclose their ethnic background ( $n = 2$ ). Participants rated themselves as more liberal ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) than conservative on a scale where 1 indicates liberal and 7 conservative.

Data collection took place between February 13 and March 21, 2024. Participants were instructed to participate using a laptop or computer due to the video content and the requirement to respond to open-ended questions. They all provided informed consent and received £2.50 for their participation.

### Materials and Instruments

Participants were instructed to watch a movie fragment comprised of edited scenes from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg, 1984). This movie was selected due to its portrayal of racial, cultural, and gender stereotypes (e.g., impoverished Indian villagers begging for help, exaggerated depictions of exotic food such as monkey brains and bugs, and a female helpless character). We integrated a moral disclaimer into the movie fragment. The disclaimer was adapted from those used on the streaming platform Disney+ but was modified to exclude direct references to the platform. It was inserted at the beginning of the movie fragment and remained on screen for 10 seconds for half of the participants. Figure 1 presents the moral disclaimer.

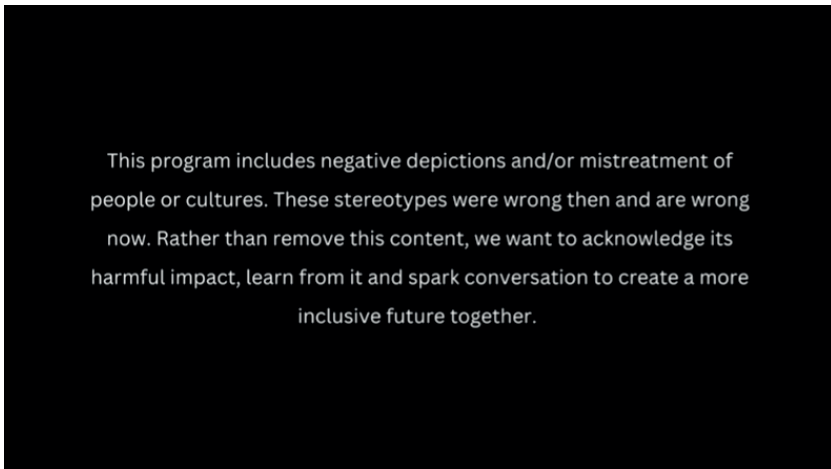


Figure 1. *The Moral Disclaimer before the Video Fragment*

After the initial assessment of disclaimer effects (not reported here), all participants were shown the moral disclaimer (again) along with an explanation of its intended purpose. To examine participants' perceptions of the disclaimer's necessity, they responded to an open-ended question: 'Do you think such a type of disclaimer is relevant for the movie fragment that you just saw? Please explain why you think this way.' Participants provided quite elaborate answers to the open question, with a mean response length of 43 words and a range between 1 and 243 words.

### Analyzing the Qualitative Responses

The responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using thematic analysis following the guide by Nowell and colleagues (2017). This approach allowed for a thorough and systematic exploration of participants' views regarding the necessity of the moral disclaimer. The analysis involved five phases. In the first phase, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading all responses to gain an initial understanding. In the second phase, *codes* were generated, which were brief labels capturing specific features of the data (e.g., 'animals are treated badly', 'wanting to use one's own judgment to consume media'). In the third phase, initial *themes* were developed by identifying patterns across multiple codes that reflect broader ideas relevant to the research question (e.g., 'acknowledge animal treatment', 'need for viewers to use own judgment'). In the fourth phase, the codes were organized under these preliminary themes, and both

codes and themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represent participants' perspectives and remained relevant to the focus on moral disclaimer necessity (e.g., 'acknowledging sensitive content', 'viewer responsibility'). In the final phase, the themes were further refined and grouped into three broader overarching perspectives (i.e., accepting of disclaimer, refining the disclaimer, resisting the disclaimer) and several themes and subthemes that further structured the findings.

## Results

Based on the analysis of the open-ended question about the perceived necessity of the moral disclaimer, three main perspectives were constructed: (1) acceptance of the disclaimer, (2) the need for refinement of the disclaimer, and (3) resistance to the disclaimer. The following section will describe each perspective and the related themes and subthemes in more detail. An overview is provided in Figure 2.

### Accepting the Disclaimer

Results show that there are various reasons why participants were accepting of the moral disclaimer and perceived it to be necessary for the movie content. Participants believed that the disclaimer provides the opportunity to: a) acknowledge sensitive content, b) contextualize the content by highlighting the disclaimer's educational value, and c) function as a protective measure.

#### *Acknowledgment of Sensitive Content*

Viewers perceive the moral disclaimer as an opportunity to acknowledge sensitive content prior to being exposed to it. However, the specific reasons for this varied. Viewers expressed the need for the disclaimer to acknowledge ANIMAL MISTREATMENT within the movie clip to prepare viewers for potentially distressing scenes regarding instances of animal mistreatment: *'Yes I do think it was necessary for this movie mainly due to the mistreatment of animals within this clip.'* Another prominent reason why participants found the disclaimer necessary was its ability to ADDRESS OUTDATED STEREOTYPES in the movie clip. They specifically highlighted aspects such as gender and cultural stereotypes. They suggested that moral disclaimers should be used to acknowledge these portrayals to inform viewers about the harmful content: *'Due to the stereotypes that are displayed in the movie I think although it is entertaining, can be harmful and reinforce outdated stereotypes (...).'* Another participant noted, *'Yes I do. (...) It's common that old films would*

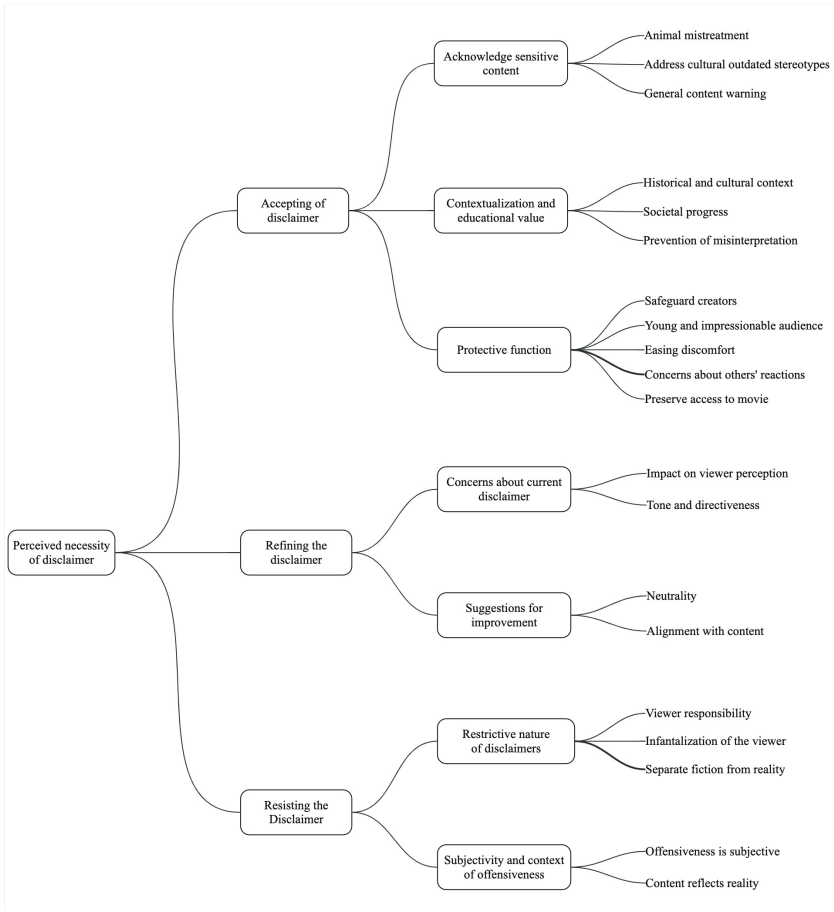


Figure 2. Overview of Participant Responses on Perceived Moral Disclaimer Necessity  
 Note. This tree chart presents the three overall perspectives (related to the perceived necessity of moral disclaimers) and all constructed themes and subthemes that reflect the reasons for accepting, changing, or resisting the disclaimer.

*portray societies and cultures in the east as backward, poverty-stricken, exotic, barbaric etc. And this was the case with this film. Also due to the portrayal of women.'* Lastly, participants believed the disclaimer to function as a GENERAL CONTENT WARNING for acknowledging disturbing scenes in the movie. Unlike the previous arguments, this was not directed at specific portrayals such as stereotyping (moral aspect of the disclaimer) but rather functioned as a broad content warning for unsettling material: *'A disclaimer could help to prepare viewers for the unusual and unsettling nature of the movie. It could also help viewers decide whether or not they want to watch the movie, based on their own preferences and sensitivities.'*

*Contextualization and Educational Value*

Participants also found the moral disclaimer to be of educational value by contextualizing the content. First, participants emphasized the need for the disclaimer to put the movie content into HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT. The disclaimer helps to accept the movie as a product of its time, especially when compared to modern views: *'Yes, I think there's a lot of content in it which today's audiences may view negatively as simply racist. While that may indeed be the case, I think there's a strong case for contextualizing it. Indiana Jones movies are also parodying older films from the 1950s about adventurers visiting faraway lands, and while there was certainly racism in filmmaking at the time when Indiana Jones was made, it's not the whole story either. Disclaimers such as this could make audiences consider these questions.'* Another argument was that a moral disclaimer can highlight the SOCIETAL PROGRESS since the movie's release. Participants suggested that the disclaimer could contextualize how societal values have changed and norms have evolved over time: *'It helps to highlight what we as a community have learned about how we portray cultures and races in movies and how those portrayals can perpetuate false behaviours and beliefs. We shouldn't delete or eradicate these scenes or movies, it's important to recognize incorrect beliefs/behaviours and learn from them, by changing the way we do things going forward.'* A third point referring to the educational value of moral disclaimers was the PREVENTION OF MISINTERPRETATION. Participants explained that the disclaimer could serve as a guide toward a more accurate understanding of negative depictions, clarifying that these portrayals are harmful and wrong to prevent viewers from perceiving them to reflect reality: *'Without the disclaimer people could see these stereotypes and believe them to be true and, even if they don't, it is worth making people watch such things with a critical eye.'* Some viewers also noted that it was through the disclaimer itself that they realized these negative portrayals, which they might have otherwise overlooked or misinterpreted.

*Protective Function*

The third theme focuses on its protective function. Participants highlighted that a moral disclaimer could function as a SAFEGUARD FOR THE CREATORS OF THE MOVIE: *'It protects the makers of the film and actors.'* Secondly, participants mentioned the target audience of these movies to be YOUNG AND IMPRESSIONABLE, and the disclaimer would be beneficial to those who did not grow up with the content: *'Also I feel that people who were not grown or growing up with this film would benefit from the acknowledgment that when something is a product of its time, the standards under which it was created*

*and originally assessed were different.* Furthermore, participants found that the disclaimer enhanced their viewing comfort by EASING DISCOMFORT, as it reassured them that the problematic aspects of the movie content were being acknowledged. This protection allowed viewers to engage with the material critically while feeling that it was still acceptable to consume: *'The lack of acknowledgment makes me feel uncomfortable, almost like by watching the clip, I feel guilty to be participating in these stereotypes. A disclaimer could help relieve that feeling.'* Interestingly, participants mentioned that while they themselves might not find the stereotypical content offensive, they recognize that OTHERS MIGHT AND SHOULD BE PROTECTED: *'Personally, I do not have a concern but I see why others would so a disclaimer would be beneficial.'* Participants accepted the moral disclaimer not because they found the disclaimer to be necessary for them personally, but because they had concerns about others' reactions to the content. Lastly, some viewers seemed to primarily accept the disclaimer to PRESERVE ACCESS TO THE CONTENT: *'I think these types of disclaimers should be displayed before showing movies with potentially outdated and racist viewpoints and depictions of cultures or characters, instead of outright banning the movies.'* Again, viewers preferred the presence of a moral disclaimer over the possibility of the movie being removed, without necessarily agreeing with the message of the disclaimer itself.

### **Refining the Disclaimer**

A second perspective based on the responses consisted of participants who, while not necessarily opposing the use of a moral disclaimer, expressed: a) concerns about the way this particular version was framed, and b) suggested refinements to improve the effectiveness of the disclaimer.

#### *Concerns about the Current Disclaimer*

Participants raised several concerns regarding the framing of the current moral disclaimer. The first major concern was that the disclaimer influenced how participants engaged with and perceived the content, making them more aware of stereotypical content they might not have noticed otherwise. Participants felt that the disclaimer primed them to look out for stereotypical content, SHAPING THEIR VIEWING EXPERIENCE in a way they might not have considered in the first place: *'I felt as though I was looking out for potentially wrong views and possibly looking for perceived problems that weren't there.'* Furthermore, participants found the disclaimer TOO DIRECTIVE IN ITS TONE, arguing that it predisposed viewers to interpret the content in a specific way rather than allowing free engagement with the content: *'I don't see the*

*problem with disclaimers because they shouldn't really upset the movie viewing experience for the viewer, although this disclaimer is way too aggressive and manipulative.'*

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

While participants had points of critique regarding the moral disclaimer, they also provided suggestions for improvement, which could be separated into two underlying subthemes. First, some participants emphasized the NEED FOR NEUTRALITY, expressing a preference for disclaimers that avoid too emotional or directive language use. Instead, they should aim for an objective presentation of information. As one participant suggested: *'I have seen in the UK for some very old programs (60s-70s) a slightly different advisory that is neutral – something like 'This program reflects language and opinions common at the time'. I consider that a much less emotional and responsible sensible way to address any issues.'* Secondly, participants highlighted the importance of having the message of the disclaimer in ALIGNMENT WITH THE CONTENT of the movie. Some felt that the message of the disclaimer did not clearly relate to the content they consumed, making it seem unnecessary. Thus, they suggested that the disclaimer should be adjusted to better reflect the specific content that is being presented: *'I don't think there was anything within the content of this movie that could be classed as inappropriate.'*

### **Resisting the Disclaimer**

As a third perspective, participants expressed resistance towards the adoption of a moral disclaimer. Within this category, two overarching themes were constructed: a) the restrictive nature of the disclaimer, limiting individual judgment and freedom, and b) the subjective nature of determining what is to be considered as offensive and stereotypical content.

#### *Restrictive Nature of the Disclaimer*

Within this theme, participants emphasized the importance of VIEWER RESPONSIBILITY, arguing that viewers should rely on their own judgment and critical thinking abilities when engaging with (stereotypical) media content. They suggested that audiences can assess material independently without needing a moral disclaimer to guide their interpretation of media content.: *'(...) people are not being able to use their own judgements, or intelligence to decide for themselves if they find something offensive.'* In line with that argument is that participants found the disclaimer to be INFANTILIZING TO THE VIEWER. One participant expressed this concern by saying, *'it assumes that viewers are children and need every piece of historical context explained*

to them'. Furthermore, participants felt that there is a need to SEPARATE FICTION FROM REALITY. Participants emphasized the importance of being able to appreciate fiction for what it is rather than overanalyzing it. They argued that, since the movie is not a reflection of reality, the disclaimer only limits the ability to consume the movie for what it was made for: '(...) *I believe that movies are just that a movie made from things that are not real and is there to make fun and interesting content. (...) I think the world has far too much babying and most people see things for what they truly are.*' They found the disclaimer to add an unnecessary layer of seriousness on a lighthearted comedy which was created purely for entertainment: *'I don't think it was relevant. It is a lighthearted movie that is entertaining, and it doesn't need a "woke" label attached to it.'*

#### *Subjectivity and Context of Offensiveness*

Within this theme, participants pointed out that cultural OFFENSIVENESS IS SUBJECTIVE. Different viewers have different perspectives on what should be considered as offensive. Because of this diversity in perception, they argued that a moral disclaimer might not be universally necessary: *'Also people have very different ideas of what is offensive/triggering and what triggers some people does not affect others. It is sometimes difficult to decide where to "draw the line".'* Finally, participants resisted the idea of the disclaimer because they perceived the content as an ACCURATE REFLECTION OF REALITY. They believed that the material shown in the movie clip was not misrepresentative. Therefore, the disclaimer was unnecessary: *'I think what is in the movie is a true depiction of the living situation where the film is based.'*

## Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate whether and, particularly, why people perceive a moral disclaimer addressing stereotypical audiovisual content as necessary. The findings offer a nuanced view into audience perceptions and negotiations regarding such disclaimers, resulting in three distinct perspectives: a) acceptance of the disclaimer, b) modification of the disclaimer, and c) resistance to the disclaimer. Broadcasting and streaming companies may have various motives for implementing moral disclaimers for stereotypical content, including corporate norms and values, as well as societal or political pressures. Nevertheless, the primary goal of these disclaimers appears to be to raise awareness, acknowledge potential harm, and foster a more inclusive society. The findings demonstrate that, although

the intended message of the moral disclaimer is explicitly stated, audience responses reflect different positions in the process of meaning-making, aligning with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. While broadcasters encode a preferred reading emphasizing inclusivity and historical awareness, audiences decode the disclaimer in negotiated or even oppositional readings.

Participants whose responses aligned with the moral intent of the disclaimer (accepting the disclaimer) emphasized its potential to acknowledge stereotypical content, to contextualize the content and be of educational value. They perceived the disclaimer as an opportunity to reflect on the historical context, on how societal values have changed over time, and how the disclaimer prevents misinterpretation. In doing so, these participants seem to decode the disclaimer largely as intended. At the same time, by reflecting critically on the stereotypical representation in the original content, they engage in an active meaning-making process that questions dominant cultural narratives (Hall, 1997).

The moral disclaimer was also accepted for more practical reasons, such as serving as a general content warning for disturbing material or offering protection. For example, safeguarding creators, protecting young and impressionable viewers, reducing discomfort, and preserving access to the film. This shows that participants considered both the creators' and the audience's perspectives. While these practical reasons support the use of a moral disclaimer, they do not always reflect the moral purpose behind it. In other words, although the disclaimer may be accepted, its intended moral function – to raise awareness about harmful representation and to encourage reflection – may be less effective when the acceptance is primarily driven by practical considerations. This suggests that for some viewers, the disclaimer functions more as a protective tool than as a prompt for critical engagement.

While being supportive of the use of moral disclaimers in principle, participants also criticized the framing of this specific version of the disclaimer and proposed changes. The directive and moral tone of the disclaimer was perceived as intrusive, limiting viewer's autonomy and influencing their perception and how they engaged with the film. Participants also noted that the moral statements of the disclaimer did not match the actual content, which resulted in frustration. These responses can be understood through the lens of psychological reactance theory, which suggests that perceived restrictions on freedom and autonomy trigger defensive responses (Brehm

& Brehm, 1981; Miron & Brehm, 2006). Hence, when moral disclaimers are perceived as too directive, they may unintentionally invite oppositional readings rather than fostering the intended reflection.

Key suggestions for disclaimer improvement included a more neutral disclaimer with a less emotional and direct tone that avoids strong evaluative language. This would essentially lead to the removal of the moral aspect of the disclaimer. This is in line with recent shifts in the entertainment industry, where new DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) regulations in the United States have led companies to revise measures to address harmful, stereotypical content. For instance, Disney replaced its moral disclaimer with a more tentative version stating, 'This version is presented as originally created and may contain stereotypes or negative depictions' (Maas, 2025). This seems to reflect the political pressure that plays a role in whether and how disclaimers are implemented.

Resistance to the moral disclaimer centered on its perceived restrictiveness and the notion that offensiveness is subjective and context-dependent. From this perspective, participants emphasized the need for individual judgment, arguing viewers should be trusted to assess content independently rather than imposing interpretations of movie content on them. Participants also stated that entertainment, especially the genre of comedic films, should be consumed as intended and for what they are, without added layers of moral interpretation. In other words, viewers want the freedom to construct their own interpretations of a film or TV series. Furthermore, participants viewed cultural offensiveness as subjective, and therefore it is difficult to identify stereotypical content in the first place. Some believed that the movie accurately reflected reality, reinforcing the belief that a moral disclaimer is unnecessary. These results demonstrate clearly that not only is the disclaimer negotiated or opposed, but also audiences engage in different meaning-making concerning the content of the movie by questioning the harmfulness of the stereotypes or the presence of stereotypes.

## Limitations and Future Research

While this study was able to provide first insights into viewer perceptions and meaning-making of moral disclaimers, several limitations must be acknowledged, which in turn opens pathways for future research directions around disclaimers.

First, the study focused exclusively on a moral disclaimer, leaving open the question of whether a more neutral disclaimer, which avoids directive and moralizing language, would be perceived similarly or differently. Given some participants' preference for greater neutrality and the implementation of non-moral, more neutral versions in practice, future research should explore how different framings of disclaimers are interpreted and negotiated by audiences. Such work can offer deeper insights into how variation in encoding shapes processes of meaning-making, audience positioning, and the balance between raising critical awareness and preserving interpretive autonomy. This touches upon a second limitation of the current work, which is the one open-ended question we applied to collect our current data. Although we believe that with the number of participants we received a wide range of participants' perceptions, more in-depth follow-up questions would further enrich our insights. Moreover, including a broader range of media content, with different genres and/or other stereotypes, would further strengthen this approach by offering deeper insight into which types of content audiences consider appropriate for (moral) disclaimers and which they do not. The current findings suggest, for example, that disclaimers may be viewed as less necessary for comedic content.

Another limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings. This sample of participants primarily consisted of native English speakers from the US or UK who identified as white, which lacked cross-cultural perspective. Given that participants were concerned with subjectiveness on what is to be considered as offensive, future research should dive further into not only the perceptions and effects of moral disclaimers in a more diverse sample but also focus on when stereotypical content is perceived as offensive and by whom. Focus group research among Asian, Black, and White participants has found, for example, that most participants, independently of race, evaluated racial jokes in the movie *Rush Hour 2* as inoffensive. The authors suggest that 'the generic conventions and textual device of comedy encourage the audience to neutralize racial differences rather than to challenge racial stereotypes' (Park et al., 2006). Hence, audience characteristics and the characteristics of the films and television shows (e.g., genre) may play a role in perceptions of whether and when portrayals are perceived as stereotypical or harmful and whether these portrayals need a moral disclaimer.

Furthermore, the (long-term) effectiveness of moral disclaimers on the intended effects, and possibly unintended side-effects, need to be studied. While participants acknowledged the educational value and the contribution

of the disclaimer towards a more critical media consumption, this study did not measure the actual direct and long-term effectiveness of moral disclaimers. Even when the implementation of the disclaimer appears to be effective in the moment, it also needs to be examined whether its use can lead to long-term changes in media consumption and whether the intended critical engagement with stereotypical content will sustain over time.

## Conclusion

This study shows that while moral disclaimers aim to raise awareness and promote reflection, audience responses are varied and shaped by concerns about autonomy, subjectivity, and the role of entertainment (vs. education). As media companies continue to navigate the challenges of stereotypical content, understanding how audiences perceive and engage with disclaimers remains crucial for ensuring that such interventions are both effective and respectful of diverse viewer perspectives.

## Note

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