Exploring Racial Discrimination in Popular Culture in English Language Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Today more and more youths are engaging themselves online and making use of media content such as popular culture for personal development. Popular culture, which is also known as mass culture or pop culture, refers to collection of behaviours, values, and artefacts that are dominant or predominant in a society at a given time. This includes popular music, print, cyber culture, sports, entertainment, leisure, fads, advertising and television. Among the various genres, popular music represents a type of popular culture that has strong appealing power. The death of George Floyd has triggered the Black Lives Matter movement not only in the US but also elsewhere in other parts of the world. The question is, is there any avenue where such an issue can be addressed 'responsibly' without silencing others under the pretext of sensitivity? Can language classrooms provide a conducive and safe environment to address this? Therefore, this study has two objectives; first is to establish and evaluate students' general perception of the Black Lives Matter movement, racial discrimination experiences and interest in pop culture via Google Forms. Next, this paper also wishes to investigate the content of popular music whether they contain relatable and useful materials to address delicate issues like racial discrimination. Beyoncé's "Black Parade" and Alicia Keys', "A Perfect Way to Die" song lyrics are chosen for content analysis. Both the statistics and analysis can help one to understand what the respondents think, evaluate the nature, meanings and relationships of certain particular terms, themes, or concepts and design suitable learning activities for meaningful learning experience.

Keywords: popular culture; songs; racial discrimination; Black Lives Matter; English language classrooms

INTRODUCTION

Google, YouTube and Facebook in particular are the sources where people are accessing various kinds of information and that includes popular culture. There are various interpretations of popular culture but we do not wish to go into its contentions. In its most general definition, it refers to a collection of behaviours, values, and artefacts that are dominant or predominant in a society at a given time (Kidd, 2017). This includes popular music, print, cyber culture, sports, entertainment, leisure, fads, advertising and television. The massive expansion of the global spread of Western popular culture today is largely due to digital communications.

When people are homebound during the COVID-19, there is little else to do but to go online. When not engaging in work, some seek entertainment from various available sites. Entertainment is a considerable part of popular culture. Among the various genres, popular

music represents a type of popular culture that continues to have strong appealing power. Using pop songs in a language classroom is not a new pedagogical endeavour. Earlier research, for instance by Richards (1969) have shown that songs help teach children the phonological and semantic aspect of a language. In addition, according to Murphy (1990), the fact that songs are "affective, simple and repetitive" make them suitable for language-based activities such as grammar and drilling purposes. The existing literature among others tends to focus on the use of pop songs to teach grammar aspects of the language to young learners (Degrave, 2019; Džanić & Pejić, 2016; Griffiths, 2012; Manoli, 2019), and secondary school students (Griffiths, 2012; Israel, 2016; Shen, 2009; Zainal Abidin et. al, 2011). To date, there is still a lack of research pertinent to how songs are used to understand dissenting and difficult issues like racial discrimination. Teaching about discriminatory practices via modes of songs helps to contextualise matters and build students' understanding of multiple viewpoints and consequently be more critical.

The death of George Floyd in the hands of the police in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 triggered the Black Lives Matter movement not only in the US but also elsewhere in other parts of the world. Closer to home, there was an acknowledgment of the need to address issues like racial tension in order to avoid detrimental effects to the country. It was cautioned that social media can be an effective communication platform to discuss such issues, albeit, it can be abused or it can trigger discord and promote hate crime (Daim, 2020). Due to the fact that language learners spend a considerable time online today, they are already consumers of pop culture. Teachers can use this form of edutainment to educate students about global issues such as racial discrimination. Classroom settings can be effectively mediated to provide a conducive and safe environment for dialogue and active engagement. Thus, this can be addressed 'responsibly' without silencing the issue under the pretext of sensitivity.

Racism can be addressed and eradicated through education. Unjust treatment due to racial profiling happens in many parts of the world. Fostering global awareness of issues like the Black Lives Matters movement is as important as other world issues. One of the skills that needs to be developed in the 21st century is global awareness. To live as global citizens, learners must be taught about diversity, tolerance, and understanding of other cultures ("Education and Skills for the 21st Century", 2017). Global awareness encourages students to become more aware of the differences of others and opens up to a realm of curiosity and appreciation for different religions, customs, appearances and languages. It is also important for students to prepare for employability in multinational companies and the global business environment. The recent Global Perspectives Survey conducted by Cambridge Assessment International Education reported that four out of five Malaysian respondents said they would like to find careers where they can personally contribute to solving pressing global problems. Nevertheless, 30% out of the respondents stated that they were not exposed to global issues in their academic curriculum in school (Mageswari, 2020). Thus, the ability to appreciate, value and work well with people of diverse backgrounds is profoundly necessary for social and academic achievement in an integrated world.

This paper has two-pronged objectives; first, it is to establish students' general awareness about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial discrimination. Second, the content of popular music will be analysed to determine whether they contain relatable and useful materials to address delicate issues such as racial discrimination. For that reason, Beyoncé's "Black Parade" and Alicia Keys', "A Perfect Way to Die" are chosen for content analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many positive effects of popular music or music in general among native speakers of English in language arts classrooms (Huston, 2018; Lefstein & Snell, 2011; Meadow, 2016).

Since this study concerns the possibility of using popular music to teach students at UiTM, this section reviews the empirical findings behind its potential in ESL/EFL contexts.

Zainal Abidin et. al (2011) conducted a study in a selected school in Kedah to evaluate if at all songs can effectively improve vocabulary competence among the secondary school students. The experimental group was exposed to songs on YouTube while the control group was taught using a teacher-centred approach over 12 sessions. Both groups had to undergo a pre and post study vocabulary test, observations and writing journal entries. The test results showed that the experimental group attained significant improvement compared to the control group. It was observed that the participants in the former were enthusiastic and enjoyed the session but the latter group did not show much interest in their lessons. From the journal entry it was found that those from the experimental group show positive feelings towards the method used while the control group expressed that their method is dry and monotonous. This study showed that using songs to learn English promotes pedagogical and linguistic benefits to students. The study by Tse (2015) surveyed the perspectives of primary school ESL teachers on the benefits of exploiting songs. The majority of teachers stated that the inclusion of songs in the English language curriculum is very much limited. Many agreed that songs provide learners with various language skills, are enjoyable and fun and it breaks the monotony of language learning. However, some cautioned that songs can divert students' concentration and teachers themselves had problems in terms of designing the instructional purposes of songs.

Studies in Indonesia have shown the success stories of using songs to teach English (Fransischa & Syafei, 2016; Husin, 2015; Lestary & Seriadi, 2019; Hendrawaty & Nurhayati, 2019). Lestary and Suriadi (2019) used them to test whether listening comprehension of public junior high school students (12 years old) in Bandung could be improved. They found that the students were able to perform well in the listening task and were more active. However, they noted that the instrumental background noise in the songs and lack of clear pronunciation of the singing were some of the challenges. Hendrawaty and Nurhayati (2019) allowed their students aged between 12 to 16 attending an English course in Jakarta to suggest the English pop songs that they would like to listen to in class. The vocabulary test recorded an average score of 70% among the students. The researchers identified that nouns are the word class that the students consider the most difficult. To increase learners' vocabulary knowledge in nouns, grammar translation techniques were adopted to explain the words in Bahasa Indonesia. In another study, elementary school learners in Padang, Indonesia were taught using popular songs among young learners (Fransischa & Syafei, 2016). The researchers found that the technique improved the students' memorization of new words and pronunciation. The study by Husin (2015) involved eight grade students (13-14 years of age) in Pontianak, Indonesia. A pre-test was conducted to measure the students' vocabulary ability and it was found the mean score was 54.02. Next, treatments were given in forms of watching the videos, singing along and group discussions identifying the messages and moral values of the songs. A post-test which consisted of writing complex sentences with 10 difficult words from the songs was conducted and the result of the mean score was 73.2. This showed that the students' vocabulary mastery increased significantly.

Apart from teaching songs for school students, it can also be used for ESL and ESL learning at the tertiary level. 83 first year students of intermediate English language proficiency in Taiwan were required to give PowerPoint presentations on the songs that they chose. Each presentation had to include information on the background of the songs, the vocabulary items and their personal responses to the song. At the end of the class presentation they were required to answer survey questions. The results suggested that they have increased their confidence in English proficiency and academic skills. Other improvements were collaborative skills, problem solving and time management skills (Luo, 2014). Arévalo (2010) conducted a study on EFL learners in a university in Colombia. His study investigated whether songs can promote

listening skills and provide engagement of cultural and social issues. Two instruments were used for data collection (i.e. listening comprehension questionnaire and classroom observation). It was discovered that the songs used were able to meet the understudied objectives. Toffoli and Sockett (2014) carried out a study focussing on songs that had a similar language focus as outlined in the textbooks. Then six lessons were designed based on the selected songs. Every lesson followed a process of warming up, presentation, practice and production. The students appeared motivated during each practice and production session. They were able to improve on their listening comprehension skills and reflect on and compare the social context in the songs.

The studies highlighted in this section show there are at least three distinct considerations for the need to use songs in language learning. First it serves the pedagogical reasons. The studies above have shown that receptive language skills like word memorization, listening comprehension skills and vocabulary can be taught, especially to young learners, due to its repetitive nature. For mature students, productive skills like discussion and writing would be suitable. However, the selection of popular western songs needs to be done carefully because they may contain elements of profanity and sexual undertones. Weedon (2009) who has experience in song-writing and pop culture in education advised teachers to investigate and establish a general awareness of students' interests before implementing it in classrooms.

Next, songs fulfil the affective needs. Songs almost always motivate learners to learn especially if the songs selected have catchy tunes and promote fun in the language learning process. This echoes the terms coined by Murphy (1990) - Stuck-In-My-Head-Phenomenon or involuntary mental rehearsal in musical form. The right content selection, and a systematic and cohesive lesson plan can capture the students, otherwise they will not be interested.

Cultural artefacts can be understood through songs. Close reading practice of lyrics engages readers to understand the politics in the text. A study conducted on the representations of Africa and the Africans in one local Malaysian newspaper, *The Star* showed a similarity of findings to those carried out in the West where their images (Africa and the Africans) were more on the negative side than positive (Sedu & Mohamad Diah, 2017). Thus, the introduction of African heritage to Malaysian students is timely and necessary. Furthermore, as Duff and Hollman (2012) asserted, the hybridity and modality of text stimulate students to think critically and develop multiliteracies.

METHODOLOGY

The first method of investigation was done via survey form (i.e. Google forms). This type of research method intends to gather students' general perception of the Black Lives Matter movement, racial discrimination experiences and interest in pop culture. In turn, the statistics can help us to understand what our student population thinks and design suitable learning activities and maximise the chance of having a meaningful learning experience with them. The questionnaires were randomly distributed to 86 diploma and undergraduate students that we taught at UiTM Pulau Pinang during the data collection. The next method is qualitative analysis of the content (i.e. lyrics of "Black Parade" and "A Perfect Way to Die"). We opted for Beyoncé's and Alicia Keys' songs because they were the two most recent songs that dealt with the matter, both released on June 19, 2020 and popularly known as Juneteenth (a combination of the words "June" and "nineteenth") to celebrate the African American emancipation from slavery in the United States. By doing so, we could measure and evaluate the nature, meanings and relationships of certain particular terms, themes, or concepts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

General awareness about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial discrimination

Demographic Result

Section A of the survey concerns background information of the respondents. Questionnaires were distributed to the classes that we taught this semester during the implementation of the study. 67.4% females and 32.6% male students responded to the survey. Most (78.1%) of the respondents are between the ages of 18 to 21 years old. Since most of the respondents are those pursuing their diploma level, this corresponds to the age of the students who enter UiTM at post SPM age which would be about 18 or above.

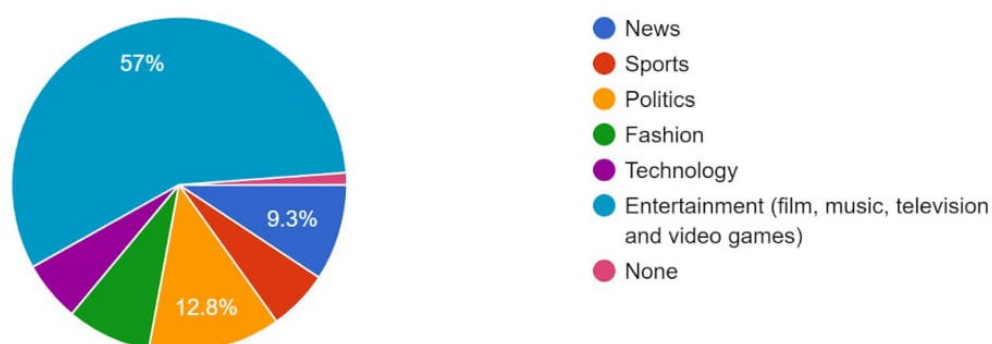*Most Prominent Aspect of Popular Culture*

FIGURE 1: Aspect of Popular Culture Respondents Think the Most Prominent In Society

In reference to Figure 1, when asked which aspect of popular culture they think is the most prominent in society, half of them (57.7%) states that entertainment (film, music, television and video games) rank the first. Second is politics (12.8%) and the third, news (9.3%). These statistics align with broader trends indicating the prevalence of entertainment in contemporary society. Indeed, the global entertainment market's staggering value, exceeding $2.2 trillion in 2021, underscores its substantial economic importance and profound cultural influence (Eser, 2024).
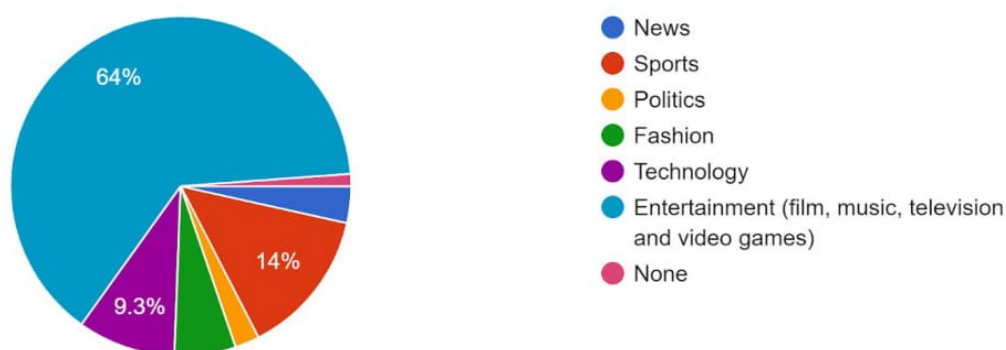
Respondents' Favourite Popular Culture

FIGURE 2: Respondents' Favourite Popular Culture

According to Figure 2 the most favourite aspect of popular culture among the respondents is entertainment (64.4%). The next favourite one is sports (14%) and third in rank is technology (9.3%). The results in Charts 1 and 2 reinforce the statement in the article entitled "Entertainment and Pop Culture" (2018) that studying a culture's art and means of communication, which reveal the societal mood, is the surest path to understanding that culture. The arts serve as a reflection of popular culture, enabling individuals to adjust their style and sense of self-identity through media such as movies, radio, books, and music.
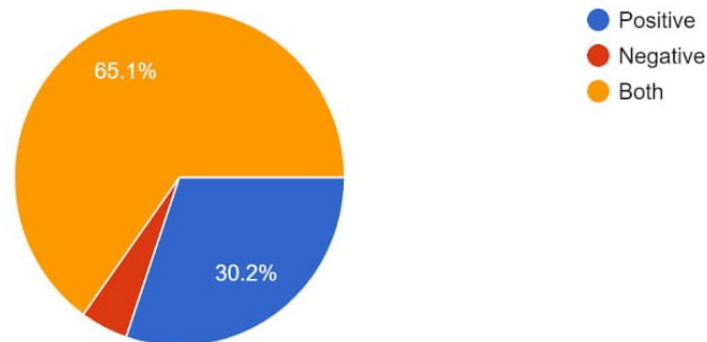
Respondents' Perception of Popular Culture

FIGURE 3: Perception of Popular Culture

Based on Figure 3 most (65.1%) of the respondents say that popular culture can be both positive and negative. One third of them voted it as positive (30.2%) and 4.7% think it is negative. These statistics suggest the potentiality of using pop culture as most respondents have positive attitudes towards pop culture. This is supported by research conducted by Singh (2022), which highlights the significant role of popular culture in shaping the cultural identity of young people. It highlights that popular culture, including Western influences, language, music, and new media, has a positive impact on young individuals' cultural perceptions and identities. The study emphasises that traditional values, fashion, and ethnicity contribute to young people's understanding of culture and help in recognizing cultural differences. Additionally, the research indicates that the youth's acceptance of new cultures through expressions leads to social development and the creation of new cultural values within society. This scholarly work supports the notion that youth have positive attitudes towards popular culture, especially in terms of embracing new cultural influences and expressions through various media platforms.

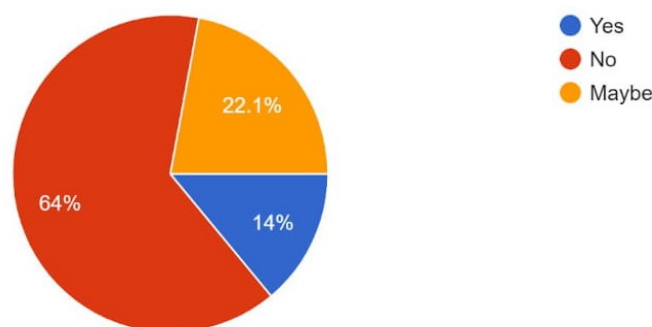## Respondents' Discrimination Experience

FIGURE 4: Racial Discrimination Experience

Figure 4 exhibits the respondents' racial discrimination experience where 64% has never experienced any while 22.1% said maybe and only 14% opted yes. The fact that most of the respondents have no experience in racial discrimination provides the researcher the opportunity to expose and introduce the respondents what it is like to face such a situation. However, these findings seem to contradict existing data. According to the Malaysia Racial Discrimination Report (2021), a significant portion of the population has indeed encountered discrimination. The report identified 53 incidents of racism, racial discrimination, or xenophobia in 2021, with racial and religious politics constituting the largest percentage at 28%. This inconsistency highlights the complexity of understanding and addressing issues related to racial discrimination within society.

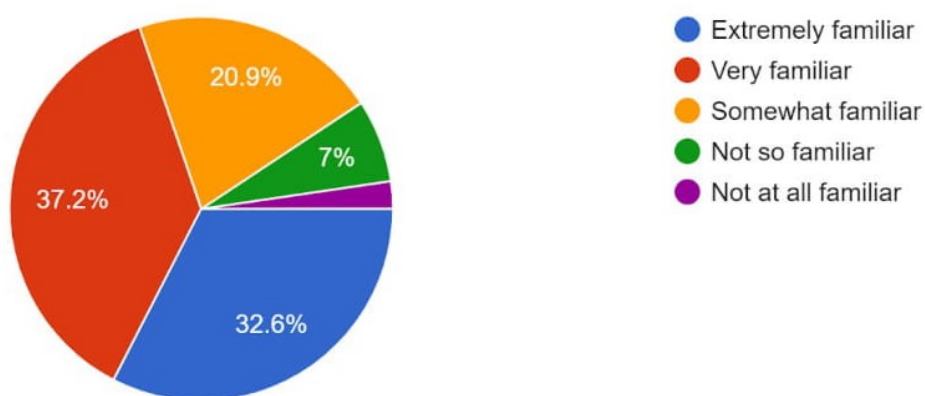### *Respondents' Familiarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement*

FIGURE 5: Familiarity of Black Lives Matter Movement

In Figure 5, respondents were asked about their familiarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, revealing that more than one third are very familiar (37.2%), while 32.6% are extremely familiar, and 20.9% are somewhat familiar. This movement has sparked discussions across various platforms, including entertainment, politics, and news. Despite its global impact, there is currently no available statistics regarding the movement's presence in Malaysia. However, a study conducted by Board et al. (2020) sheds light on the movement's perception in the United States. Despite its advocacy for justice and accountability, including among Black Americans, the Movement for Black Lives, which encompasses Black Lives Matter, remains controversial. While a plurality expresses strong support, approximately 41% of Black Americans hold reservations or are less enthusiastic about the movement. These findings underscore the nuanced and multifaceted nature of public opinion surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement.

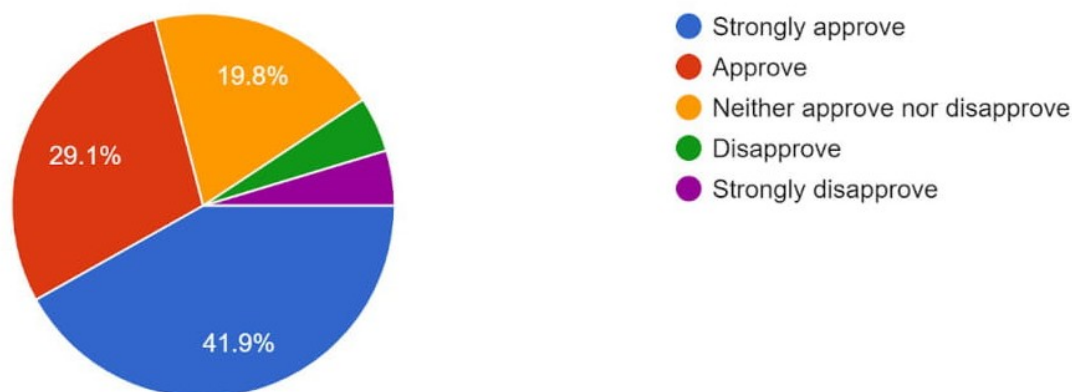***Respondents' Approval of the Black Lives Matter Movement***

FIGURE 6: Approval of Black Lives Matter movement

Figure 6 exhibits that more than half (71%) of the respondents strongly approve and approve of this movement. About 20% neither approve nor approve. Very small percentage states disapprove and strongly disapprove of this movement. This suggests that the topic could indeed be suitable for inclusion in classrooms, given the high level of approval and interest among the general public. Moreover, the Black Lives Matter movement has garnered considerable attention and support among various demographics, including African Americans, Hispanics, and younger generations (O'Connell-Domenech, 2023). Thus, incorporating discussions and activities related to the Black Lives Matter movement in classrooms might enhance student engagement and encourage them to learn more about current social issues and movements.

Content Analysis

"A Perfect Way to Die"

"A Perfect Way to Die" is written from the personal perspective of a mother who loses her son to police violence. The title "A Perfect Way to Die' is ironic because it creates a contrast between the situation and the action that unfolds in the lines of the song.

The song starts with "Simple walk to the corner store" evoking the incident which was similar to what happened on February 26, 2012 where an African American teen, Trayvon Martin was fatally shot on his way home from a convenience store, by George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch volunteer (History.com, 2020).

The next line "Can you calm down? Please, ma'am can you calm down?" exhibits the heartbreak of a mother when she is called by the coroner. When the mother cried, the coroner was unsympathetic towards her. The tragic death due to police brutality was brought to the streets where the protestors were gunned down using [bullets] "rained in the city and resulted in "a river of blood in the streets". Both words conjure up another form of brutality, this time to the masses.

"Black Parade"

"Black Parade" celebrates the Afro Diaspora and black activism. This song is full of slang words and symbolic representations of African heritage. The song begins with a call by the

narrator to return to the south: "I'm goin' back to the South, I'm goin' back, back, back, back", Where my roots ain't watered down.

The "south" mentioned in relation to the discourse suggests the southern (and also western) part of Africa where most African Americans descend from. The speaker remains grounded to her ancestral roots and culture of Africa symbolically like the baobab, a tree native to Africa which is also known as the tree of life due to its long withstanding lifespan and various ethnobotanical importance.

The chorus part mentions the role of a queen bee. Literally a queen bee is the head of the colony and is able to lay up to thousands of eggs daily. Another role of hers is to help regulate the unity of the colony. The 'bee' is synonymous to Beyoncé herself. She is known as 'Bey' pronounced like 'bee' and her dedicated group of superfans as 'beyhive' pronounced as 'beehive'. In the figurative sense, the narrative voice likened her role as a queen bee calling for everyone to join the protest.

Colour symbolism related to the Blacks runs throughout the song - melanin, black, chrome, matte black. She calls for everyone to be proud of their colour and even coin the word 'black love' to suggest the possibility of such a concept despite the word black at most times being connotatively negative.

Multiple phrases were referred to African cultural references. "Ankh charm on gold chains" denotes not only wealth of the wearer but also one's identity. The ankh is an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol commonly used in writing and in Egyptian art to represent the word for "life" and, by large, as a symbol of life itself. This also demonstrates how large the African continent is, the northern part constitutes countries such as Egypt which civilisation coalesced around 3100 BC much earlier than the Western civilisation. "Drip all on me, woo, Ankh or the Dashiki print" - Ankh and Dashiki refer to African print design. "Waist beads from Yoruba" – refers to traditional African accessories that consist of small glass beads on a string or wire worn around the waist or hips worn by people in western part of Africa. Waist beads are a symbol of femininity, fertility, sensuality, and spiritual well-being. "Pandemic fly on the runway in my hazmat" – BLM protest in 2020 coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic. "Hazmat" refers to the protective equipment worn by medical personnel for protection against coronavirus; it can also suggest the African form of clothing and accessories as mentioned above. Reference to "sweat that smells like nag champa" suggest the 'power of hard word' is likened to the fragrance of Indian origin which comprises aromatic smoke that is released when Sandalwood is burned most often used during meditation.

The songwriter referred to two African spiritualties in her song. Oshun refers to the goddess the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria and one of the most powerful of all goddesses. Yoruba is associated with water, purity, fertility, love, and sensuality. The Oshun also possesses human characteristics such as vanity, jealousy, and spite. Another goddess, Yemaya is the water goddess and patron of expectant mothers. Yemaya was brought over to the New World by enslaved Africans in the early 16th century.

A mixture of successful contemporary and past black personalities are mentioned in "Black Parade". Those mentioned are not only in the U.S. but also from other parts of the world. This to indicate the diversity and heterogeneity within the Black culture itself. Mansa Musa was a sultan of the Mali Empire which was an Islamic West African state (c. 1280 – c. 1337). He conquered 24 cities and helped his empire reach tremendous growth by encouraging arts, literature and architecture. Mansa Musa was described as one of the wealthiest individuals of the Middle Ages; the slang words "Four hunnid billi', Mansa Musa (Woo)" mean four hundred billion to suggest his immense wealth. Curtis Mayfield was an American artiste and one of the most influential musicians behind soul and politically conscious African-American music. He first achieved success and recognition with The Impressions during the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, and later worked as

a solo artist. Lil' Malcolm is the accordionist from Lil' Malcolm & The House Rockers who plays Zydeco, a music genre that evolved in southwest Louisiana by French Creole speakers. This music blends blues, rhythm and blues, and music indigenous to the Louisiana Creoles and the Native people of Louisiana. Martin refers to none other than Martin Luther King J, African American civil rights leader (1929-1968). While momma Tina refers to Beyoncé's mother, Tina Knowles-Lawson who is in her own right is a successful American entrepreneur and fashion designer. Tamika refers to Tamika Danielle Mallory, an American activist. Mallory is a proponent of gun control, feminism, and the Black Lives Matter movement. She was one of the leading organizers of the 2017 Women's March.

CONCLUSION

Given the limitations of this preliminary study, there is a need to further document the process of teaching these songs to UiTM students. New research can also measure the effectiveness of such methodology compared to conventional methodologies. In order to incorporate pop culture, teachers must be educated in new media. Research can be conducted easily online to match what type of songs reflect the issue that teachers wish to teach in class,

One of the findings shows that half (57%) of the respondents think that entertainment is the most prominent genre of popular culture in society. Another data reveals that the type of popular culture that is most favoured by the respondents is also entertainment (64%). These two data demonstrate that entertainment is a pivotal aspect that the respondents perceived as important to them but also to the society at large. This manifests that entertainment has a powerful influence on all of us. Thus, students can benefit a great deal when education and entertainment (or edutainment) go hand in hand. Another survey result demonstrates about 30% of respondents are in the category of somewhat familiar-not so familiar-not at all familiar. Unfamiliarity of global issues such as racial discrimination can breed ignorance and ignorance can breed misunderstanding and fear.

Songs can be utilised as teaching repertoires to expound issues that are real time and yet taboo such as anxiety, teen suicide and sexual abuse. Contextualised learning happens when teachers are able to find suitable songs to be used in class and students are able to relate to situations of the world and construct meaning based on their own understanding and experiences. Incorporating western pop-culture in L2 language learning must be mapped out with proper instructional design. Learners can be turned down easily with the foreign culture and the informal registers of the target language. In the case of this study teachers must encourage learners to do intertextual or cross referencing to dictionaries, slang dictionaries, music and history in order to interpret meaning. In addition, pop songs containing profanity need to be carefully screened before use. Future studies can also employ 'new' social media platforms such as Tiktok, Snapchat, Caffeine, Houseparty or Steemit for educational purposes. These applications, popular among the young generations when brought into class, can make learning more natural and fun.

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APPENDIX A

<div align="center">

Survey Questions

Exploring Racial Discrimination using Popular Culture

in English Language Classroom

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Assalamualaikum and hello everyone. We are conducting a survey on "Exploring Racial Discrimination using Popular Culture in English Language Classroom". The study intends to investigate students' perceptions on popular culture and racial discrimination that exist in global society. I would appreciate it if you could complete the following survey. The response obtained from this survey will be used for academic purposes only and is confidential. Thank you for making your time.

SECTION A: BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONDENTS

1. Gender :
- Male
- Female

2. Age :
- 18 to 21 years old
- 22 to 24 years old
- 25 years old and above

3. Level of study :
- Diploma
- Degree

SECTION B: POPULAR CULTURE

1. Which aspect of popular culture that you think is the most prominent in society?
- News
- Sports
- Politics
- Fashion
- Technology
- Entertainment (film, music, television and video games)
- None

2. Which aspect of popular culture is your favourite?
- News

- Sports
- Politics
- Fashion
- Technology
- Entertainment (film, music, television and video games)
- None

3. Do you think the rise of popular culture is positive or negative

- Positive
- Negative
- Both

SECTION C: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

1. Have you ever experienced discrimination, because of your race, in the past?

- Yes
- No

2. Do you think racial discrimination is increasing, decreasing or staying the same in this country?

- Increasing
- Decreasing
- Staying the same

3. Have you heard about Black Lives Matter movement?

- Extremely familiar
- Very familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Not so familiar
- Not at all familiar

4. Do you approve of "Black Lives Matter"?

- Strongly approve
- Approve
- Neither approve or disapprove
- Disapprove
- Strongly disapprove