

Representation of Racism in the Film “Good Hair: Perceptions of Racism”

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Abstract. *Racism is differentiated by the majority in the treatment of minorities on purpose based on inequality in skin color, race, race, even physical origin, and appearance that is thought to restrict and prohibit the rights and freedoms of a person. The research aims to describe the application of John Fiske's theory to analyze the forms of racial discrimination in this short film by approach to reality, representation, and ideology. Qualitative study methods of descriptive media text analysis examine three approaches to John Fiske's semiotics analysis. The results of this study suggest that the application of John Fiske's theory of discussing racism's representation in this short film lies in the visible levels of reality based on the codes of appearance, expression, and gestures. The representational level is indicated on the camera code. In contrast, ideology levels are indicated by the results of a level of reality and representation of the attitudes and dialogues of certain characters that reflect the behavior of racism. The racism reflected in this short film is a restriction on black people's rights and freedom to express themselves through their hairstyle. And the white people feel so superior, and all the standards and policies that exist should conform to their culture.*

Keywords: *Semiotics, John Fiske, Representation, Racism, Black People*

I. INTRODUCTION

A film is a form of mass communication media (audiovisual) that displays a series of moving images and has a storyline, point of view, time setting, atmosphere, and place that includes various messages, meanings, or information. In addition, movies have become one of the most popular entertainment mediums that have transformed into a daily routine to relieve themselves from exhausting activities. That's why watching movies is one of the most popular activities for everyone and has become a habit since ancient times. Not only as an entertainment medium but also as an education, which can provide individual's personal growth, and people's mindsets.

Law of The Republic of Indonesia Number 33 of 2009 defines a film as a work of cultural art in social institutions and mass communication media made based on cinematographic principles or without sound and then shown. According to kemenkeu.go.id, movies play a significant role in influencing people's mindsets. There are three kinds of films, documentary films that attempt to document reality, fiction that contains the author's imagination or only fictitious, and experimental films. As technology and communication progresses, film becomes increasingly accessible at any time or place.

This is because of the proliferation of media digitization that results in a lot of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max, Viu, WeTV, YouTube, and more. Even the illegal sites that are now popular with many. Some of these examples

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have been classified into new media concepts. It is characterized by digital or based on Internet technology, flexible, potentially interactive, and can be private or public.

The development of films today can be seen from the increasing number of films produced and in terms of enthusiasts. Nowadays, movies have become a mass communication medium to communicate about the social reality that occurs in everyday life. People expected to be able to interpret the messages and meanings contained in movies. In addition to conveying messages, films also present visualizations through signs, symbols, and dialogue. These depictions are still related to the reality of society. Signs appear to change people's mindsets. According to KBBI, representation is an action that portrays a representative condition. In general, representation in a film is an action that represents a social reality through signs, symbols, and dialog.

Packed with an epic storyline, combined with social reality and the author's imagination, making a movie is acceptable. Due to visualizing the scenes played by actors and actresses, camera methods are important during filmmaking. Then, there are different kinds of shots to represent a scene, namely, a) Long Shot, the picture is taken as a whole to describe the moving object, b) Wide Shot, often referred to as a long shot, but filmed with an extra wide lens, c) Medium Long Shot, the picture is taken from the head to the knee. d) Medium Shot, the shooting distance is from the waist up, highlighting body language and movement. e) Medium Close-Up, the shooting distance starts from the head to the chest. f) Close-Up, if it's a person, the object only shows the face, while the object of the object is visible parts. g) Big Close-Up, the shooting distance tends to be even closer. If the object is a person, only certain parts are shot, such as the eyes, lips, throat, and other visible parts.

The United States is one of the film capitals of the world. The largest film industry in the world is in the United States, known as Hollywood. It turned out to be the oldest and most successful film industry compared to others. Hollywood has a large following and is renowned for its effective marketing tactics to reach a global audience (Ma'as, 2022).

Many film industries produce films by choosing the current social realities issue, racism. An imbalance that triggers racism is quite common to happen in social interactions. Racism is the differentiation of treatment carried out by the majority group against minority groups intentionally based on skin color, race, ethnicity, origin, and even physical appearance, considered to limit and prohibit a person's rights and freedoms.

Racism can generally occur anywhere. There was a viral case that attracted public attention related to racist behavior towards Papuan students in one of the universities in Surabaya and Malang. The incident began when there were allegations of the destruction of the Indonesian flag thrown into the ditch of the Papuan student's dormitory by irresponsible people. The Papuan students who were there got intimidated along with hate speech. And no evidence or perpetrators were found who had damaged the red and white flag. The incident triggered massive demonstrations in various regions of Papua and West Papua. They demanded that the perpetrators of racism face

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their punishment.

Meanwhile, in the United States, cases of racism have repeatedly occurred, especially in acts of discrimination committed by white people against blacks, or vice versa. The form of discrimination shown is segregation carried out by white people against African Americans by openly emphasizing physical and biological differences, which creates the view that the social status of blacks is lower, inferior, minority, and backward (Banda, 2020). The black phenomenon is always juxtaposed and labeled by white people as a crime and criminal activity, so there must be clear regional segregation to provide limited space for black people to move so they can not threaten people's lives (Banda, 2020).

There is a film that tells a story about the issue of racism in the United Kingdom, a short film entitled "Good Hair: Perceptions of Racism" produced by Asase Amoah and friends at The Open University. It premiered on the YouTube channel OpenLearn from The Open University on October 21, 2022.

The film describes the policy of racial issues that discriminate against a mother named Thema and her daughter, Ama. They're the only black people in the school environment and their jobs. How could it not be? In school, there appearance policy that does not allow African students and Carribeans to use their natural hairstyle. Whereas the type of hair belonging to a black person is a creamer and tends to expand. If they use a natural hairstyle to school, they will be sent home as 'obstructing' vision and not according to established policies.

This film is interesting to be used as research material because it can provide education. The film is simple yet concise, making it easy to understand. In addition, the film received pretty much viewers, with a total of 48,148 viewers. The audiences are giving positive reviews in the comments section, and the audiences mentioned they felt represented by this short film. The audience hopes that through this short film, non-Black people can open their views toward Black people. How is the representation of racism in the short film "Good Hair: Perceptions of Racism" is the problem formulation. The research aims to describe the application of John Fiske's theory to analyze the forms of racial discrimination that occur in this short film by approach to reality, representation, and ideology.

Previous studies were held up by researchers because they discussed similar matters to obtain information. First, research by Annisa Azzahra and O. Hasbaniyah entitled "The Meaning of Interracial Conflict in Green Book". The method used in this study is qualitative methods using John Fiske's semiotics theory of analysis. This research was meant to know the meaning of reality, representation, and ideology of interracial conflict in the Green Book film. The study has found codes of conflict, discrimination, and racism that are proved through role-player conversations (Azzahra & Hasbiansyah, 2021).

Second, research by Muhammad Ridwan and Cutra Aslinda entitled "A Semiotical Analysis of Discrimination on The Hate U Give". The method used in this study is qualitative methods using

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John Fiske's semiotics theory of analysis. The purpose of this study is to analyze the racial discrimination expressed in some parts of the film *The Hate U Give*. It showed from this study that justice is not to be served without racial discrimination. It shows how discrimination is carried out on the black race and describes the risk of victims of injustice, causing mental disorders, stress, anxiety, and depression (Ridwan & Aslinda, 2022).

Third, research by Rangga Cahyo Mukti Laksana and Widya Dhana Kusuma Nararya entitled "John Fiske's Semiotics Analysis of the Class Struggles Representation of the *Peaky Blinders* Series." The method used in this study is qualitative methods using John Fiske's semiotics theory of analysis. The research aims to know the purpose of the message transmission and class struggle in the *Peaky Blinders* film series over the sign. In this study lies a fact regarding social strata classification which is where it happened intentionally and was constructed socially (Mukti laksana & Kusuma Nararya, 2022).

With these early studies, the authors could make new improvements in the study's context on race and social class. In addition, this previous research may allow for further research.

The theory used in this research is John Fiske's semiotics representation theory by Judy Giles and Tim Middleton. Semiotics is a method of analysis in shaping a sense of signs or symbols in a text or message found in an object. John Fiske gave his theory on television codes. According to him, the signs displayed in a television program were continuous, giving meaning. The theory reveals that social reality doesn't just arise through those signs. Through processing, with the experience and understanding it has, the mark produces a different meaning in each individual. As the age progresses, John Fiske's theory is not limited to television but as well extends into other media texts (Zainiya & Aesthetika, 2022).

In John Fiske's theory, the level of reality, representation, and ideology are the three approaches used to explore social phenomena. Marks on the level of reality are comprehensible by codes of appearance, costume, makeup, dress, speech, gestures, behavior, expression, environment, and so forth. The level of representation contains camera movement, editing, lighting, and music that form a representation. Such aspects as conflict, narration, and casting. The ideology level, in turn, is a social code that results from a level of reality and a level of representation as the ideology of capitalism, race, patriarchy, and so on.

Whereas representation means an activity representing a circumstance for the text portrayed. In this case, the text is not only a written text but also pictures, experiences, and audio-visual. According to Judy Giles and Tim Middeton, representation can be understood by three meanings, which: 1) to stand for, means to speak or act on behalf of a sign, 2) present (to speak or act on behalf of), to represent the state of an individual as well as a group, 3) to re-present, means to represent circumstance wrapped in a movie audiovisual form.

II. METHODS

The researcher used a qualitative research method with a descriptive type of research of media text analysis conducted using John Fiske's semiotics analysis approach. The subject of this study was a short film entitled "Good Hair: Perceptions of Racism", which would later be divided into several passages for researchers to analyze. The data collection technique used was by direct observation of the research object. Second, literacy studies such as journals, articles, previous research, blogs, official sites, and so forth that relate to the study. Last, note the results of the analysis. The primary data is earned by direct observation by viewing, listening to, and understanding the content of the research object. The secondary data is acquired from literacy studies such as journals, previous research, websites, and others. The three techniques of semiotics by John Fiske to analyze film footage in this research are the levels of reality, representation, and ideology (Zainiya & Aesthetika, 2022).

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to (Williams, 2017), expressing beauty through hairstyle has long been a trademark of black culture. Ranging from an afro hairstyle, wraps or wraps around the head, to braids. Black women use a variety of hairstyles to express themselves. As well as to demonstrate how black culture evolves from time to time. An evolution that has made them love and more and more proud of the natural beauty of their hair. In the past, black women have been forced to hide their hair because of social bullying, harassment, and racial discrimination that have occurred.

Cited from (Nkimheng et al., 2023), hair, beauty, self-image, and identity are a continuous, interwoven whole. Hair and hairstyle have become significant aspects of beauty, confidence, and self-identity (THOMPSON, 2009). The choice of hairstyle is a form of response to several factors, including the perceptions of an individual relating to the standards of beauty that dominate. Therefore, some who believe that hair that is straight or straightened is considered "good hair" or is more beautiful may change its natural hairstyle to conform to available standards of beauty (Robinson, 2011).

On the other hand, few people decide to change their hairstyle because of the fear of discrimination that would come towards them if an individual used their natural hairstyle (Nkimheng et al., 2023). Thus, they choose to avoid that from happening. Hair discrimination is referred to as hair bias, hair racism, or hair harassment as the negative stereotypes and attitudes displayed toward the natural hairstyles of black people (McGill Johnson et al., 2017). Natural hair is typical of black people's hairstyles including afros, locs, twist-outs, and braids (Thomas, 2013). People viewed the natural hair of black people as unattractive and unmanageable.

1. Scene Time Code 0:15 – 0:30



Figure 1. The role of Thema
(source: <https://youtu.be/vkmnkbVc7iM>)

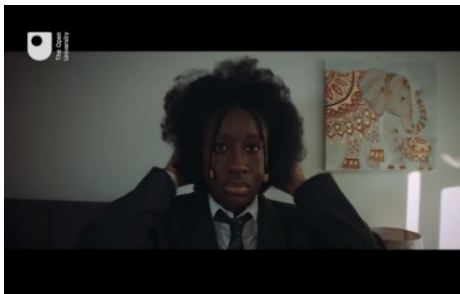


Figure 2. The role of Ama
(source: <https://youtu.be/vkmnkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, the environment in the scene appears to be in the room, as shown by the properties such as mattresses, pillows, and cupboards. They are eccentric in appearance, as black people like to do things with their hair, such as adding accessories because they are attractive. The costumes of Thema and her daughter, Ama, were neatly pressed uniforms. The difference is that Thema goes to work while Ama goes to school. The polishing of the makeup used in this scene looks natural because the makeup is based on the skin tone. Judging from her expressions, they look happy and excited because this is the first day of Ama entering school.

At the level of representation, shot at the scene 0:15 and 0:24 using medium shot techniques. The use of medium shot techniques in these early scenes used to introduce the roles to audiences. The lighting in this scene is illuminated along with sunlight, signifying a bright morning atmosphere. The instrument accompaniment used sounded casual and appropriate for the mood in the morning.

At the ideology level, this scene is as if it shows the existence of Thema and Ama as black citizens.

2. Scene Time Code 0:35 – 0:45

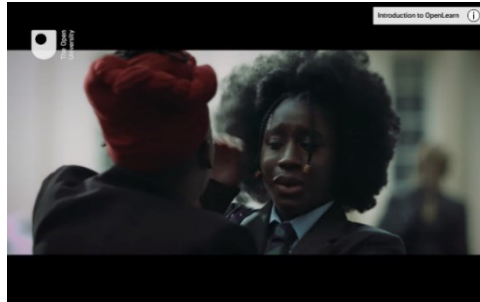


Figure 3. Thema touched Ama's hair and Ama pushed Thema's hand.
(source: <https://youtu.be/vkmnkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, this scene took in a schoolyard, signed by the sight of several students passing by. From the point of expression, it is obvious that Ama feels uncomfortable when Thema takes a picture of her. This is seen by the defocused movement of her eyes and several times a glance around. Next, an expression of annoyance and discomfort is displayed when Thema touches her hair. This was characterized by her furrowed brow along with a slightly raised tone of voice as if signaling to stop doing so.

At the level of representation, the shot is a medium close-up technique. Through this technique, the details of body language and the expression of objects can be visible. The lighting was so bright because it was outdoors.

At the level of ideology, it shows the mother, Thema, touching her daughter's hair. But she looked so annoyed and awkward that she slashed off his mother's hand. It can be seen from the following dialogue,

“Ok, that’s enough.” Ama says,
“I can touch, I gave you good hair.” Thema responded.

Their dialogue, suggests that a black person is uncomfortable when someone touches their hair, as it is perceived to be immodest, especially if a foreigner is doing the same.

3. Scene Time Code 1:13 – 2:01



Figure 4. Judging facial expressions by Nicole
(source: <https://youtu.be/vkmmkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, Sam and Nicole were washing their hands in the sink with a small talk about Thema in the bathroom. The clothes they wear are casual, typical office clothes. Nicole's behavior shows intolerance because of her expression and behavior that belittles and disrespects Thema.

At the level of representation, the shot is taken using medium shot techniques. The lighting appeared a little dim but still bright because of the lighting coming from the lights and windows in the room, and the white domination of the tile. There is no use of musical or audio accompaniment in this scene.

At the level of Ideology Nicole's dialogue that was spoken to Sam suggests that Nicole was both skeptical and palpable of Thema's potential so that she could get where she is. It was also based because Thema was the only black woman at the company she worked for. Here's a dialogue that shows Nicole's intolerant behavior,

"Well, she's the only black woman in the department. And she just got the job,"

"Qualified is a given, but nobody gets a partnership just because they're qualified. They get the position because they have a quality the partners think they're missing," says Nicole.

"Would you be saying this if she were a white man?" Sam responded.

In this dialogue, Sam's statement is the amplifying fact that the white people were regarded as superior intellectually. Black people, on the other hand, were thought to be lacking competence in getting a good job.

4. Scene Time Code 2:45 – 3:22



Figure 5. The meeting of Thema and Mrs. Cross
(source: <https://youtu.be/vkmmkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, Ama is sitting alone, waiting for her mother's arrival in the school lobby. Mrs. Cross told Thema to come to school because something was wrong with her daughter's appearance. Thema shows an expression of fear and worry, and so does her daughter, Ama. It is signed by their corn-up eyebrows, wide-open eyes, and Thema's posture that wraps her hands and unites their fingers forward. As for Mrs. Cross, she gave an intimidating look, proved by her steady posture with a slightly raised chin, and sharp gaze, and her speech was clear and confident.

At the level of representation, a medium close-up technique is used in this scene, so that the detail of an object's facial expression and body language. In this scene, sunlight is obtained from the lobby window. Blue tone pigmentation used in this scene is the impression of coldness. No musical accompaniment is used in this scene.

At the level of ideology, Mrs. Cross explained why she told Thema to come to school, and her statement was considered intimidating and put Thema in a situation of shock. Here's a line between Thema and Mrs. Cross which contains an intimidation element,

“It’s just that they said there was an issue with her uniform,” says Thema.

“It’s not specifically her uniform. It’s her hair,” said Mrs. Cross,

“It doesn’t comply with the school’s uniform and appearance policy. All hair needs to be of a reasonable size and length.” she continued.

From Mrs. Cross's statement above, it belongs to verbal racism. For these reasons, not everyone has straight, long, and thin hair, especially someone with a different racial background.

5. Scene Time Code 8:02 – 8:15



Figure 6. Picture of Kerry and Ama
(Sumber: <https://youtu.be/vkmnkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, a blonde-white girl named Kerry suddenly came into the bathroom and approached Ama to introduce herself while Ama fixed her hair alone. In terms of appearance, Ama is trying to obey the school policy by putting her hair in a ponytail. While Kerry left her hair loose. Their makeup seems natural, not over.

At the level of representation, the medium shot technique is used for filming this scene. The lighting in the bathroom was dim because of the lack of light, and light only came through a lamp. The blue tone with a little hint of yellow used in this scene gives the impression of coldness and awkward moments.

At the level of ideology, judging by the filming technique, Kerry and Ama are side by side to show the audience the comparison between whites and blacks. It represents the physical differences and demonstrates how school policy regarding appearance is applied. The distinction of treatment implied in Kerry's dialogue, she says,

“My hair’s longer than yours, and the school doesn’t say anything to me.”

Kerry's statement is interpreted that a natural hair policy does not apply to white students in the school. They assumed that European hair was aspirational and should be standardized. The beauty standard in Europe is white, light-colored eyes, and a pointed-sharp nose (Thomas, 2013). By applying this beauty standard, it would harm women who are not of the Caucasian race.

6. Scene Time Code 8:30 – 8:45



Figure 7. Mrs. Cross meets Ama in the school corridor
(Sumber: <https://youtu.be/vkmmkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, it seems that Mrs. Cross was rushing out of the room and carrying books. But she suddenly stopped when Ama and Kerry came out of the shower. As always, Mrs. Cross always focused on Ama. She gave an intimidating stare like an attitude of disapproval of someone. This is signed by the look in Mrs. Cross's eyes and the sharp slit on her forehead. This expression was expressed by Mrs. Cross when she saw Ama's appearance. In this scene, Ama lets her hair loose just like the natural hairstyle of a black person. Ama stopped her step when she realized Mrs. Cross was there. But this time the expression of fear and anxiety was no longer indicated by her. She looked at Mrs. Cross very normally. Even a little challenging.

At the level of representation, the long-shot technique is used at a minute to 8:23 and the medium shot is used at minutes 8:24 to 8:45. The use of the long-shot technique in this scene is to show a moving object, whereas the medium close-up technique is used to amplifying the expression of the object. The lighting around the school corridor was dark, the light was obtained through the window. The blue tone gives off a cold and strained impression.

At the level of ideology, Mrs. Cross was disbelieved and surprised by Ama's ignoring her orders. Ama responds firmly to the criticism. For the first time, Ama refused Mrs. Cross's order to change her hairstyle because nothing was wrong with her hair. The conversation that demonstrated the racism in the scene was,

“Ama.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cross?”

“Would you like to go back to the ladies to tend to your hair?!” ujar Mrs. Cross.

“But there's nothing to tend to, miss.” Ama responded.

Ama's statement indicates that there is resistance to the school policy that discriminates against and harms black people in school.

7. Scene Time Code 12:16 – 13:35



Figure 8. Picture of Issa and Ajay in The Herald office
(Sumber: <https://youtu.be/vkmnkbVc7iM>)



Figure 9. Mrs. Cross speaking to Issa and Ajay through phone
(Sumber: <https://youtu.be/vkmnkbVc7iM>)

At the level of reality, a journalist named Issa from the Herald newspaper contacted Thema through Ajay's mobile phone, one of the teachers at the Ama school. The second reason for contacting Thema is that Issa wants to help out with Ama's problem by writing a policy news item that invites elements of racism at the Ama school. However, Thema rejected Issa's offer because she did not want Ama to suffer a negative impact if her attempts were unsuccessful. In this scene, Issa and Ajay have a set take in The Herald Newspaper office. Spotted by a company name on the wall of the room. Thema is in her workroom at her house. Seen by a laptop, papers, a desk lamp, a standing light, and a sofa. The polishing of the makeup used in this scene looks natural. Their clothes looked comfortable. In expressive terms, Thema shows little anxiety and confusion. Seen from her facial expressions and the slightly quivering tone of Thema.

At the level of representation, medium shot and medium close-up techniques are used in this scene. Also, the lighting used appeared a little dark, as if describing the conditions at night. Because the background was in the room, lighting depended only on the lights and the light outside the window. Blue tone touch adds to the coldness.

At the level of ideology, the evidence that contains discrimination against black people shown

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in the dialogue between Issa and Thema,

“Black women spend six times more than they have than white women. Between hair pieces and wigs and braids, I'm spending 2,500 (poundsterling) a year,” said Issa.

“This would be the perfect entry point to write an article deconstructing the narrative that European hair is an aspirational and should be the standard.” she continued.

“It's still a pass. I suspect the school won't appreciate being portrayed in this way.” Thema responded.

“And their displeasure might manifest in a way that would not be advantageous to my daughter. It's not a risk I'm keen on taking. She's the only Black person in the whole of her year and I'm not looking to find another way for her to stand out. And to be honest, I've already got an affirmative action question mark hanging over my recent promotion. I don't want to compound that by being the Black family in the paper because of insert racist incident.” she continued.

Issa's statement explained that women of African background and Caribbean charge more than white women. This is in the background by European standards of beauty. Many black women spend a lot of money on just buying hair accessories and hair-care products. Thema's statement explained that it is difficult for minorities like themselves to voice their voices because they tend not to be heard.

By the finding and discussion above, it finds that the forms of racism found in this film are:

According to society, the concept of European standards of beauty is the most perfect and highly appealing. European standards of beauty require people of any race other than Caucasians to have fair, fair skin, long straight hair, a sharp pointed nose, thin lips, and light-colored beautiful eyes. Although many today have embraced racial and cultural differences, it is undeniable that the natural hairstyles of the black person are still considered political or unprofessional by white citizens (Thomas, 2013).

In an interview by (Andrews, 2017), Many black people increasingly complain about the amount of time and effort it takes to take care of their hair. As was the case in the film, it mentions that black women spend a lot of money on wigs and hair-care products to reach European beauty standards.

Hair discrimination also occurs in the school's various forms, one of which is the school's policy in terms of appearance. There are stories and experiences about children getting bullied by friends or teachers. Something similar happens in this film. Ama, a student at St. Mary's school, was discriminated against by her teacher, Mrs. Cross, because of her loose and unmanageable natural hairstyle. Mrs. Cross thinks Ama's natural hair is blocking someone else's view. However,

this policy does not apply to white students at this school who are not concerned about the use of their long natural hairstyles like Kerry. It causes adverse effects such as hampering an individual's self-confidence.

Furthermore, another form of racism depicted in the film is the work sphere, in which Thema as a black worker thought to be lacking competence in getting a good and decent jobs. White people, on the other hand, were regarded as superior intellectually.

But over time, rising media coverage, social conversation, and policy changes have become evidence of the effects of hair discrimination (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2018). For example, in the film, Issa, a journalist from The Herald Newspaper, was involved in tackling the problem Ama was having with school policies that were discriminating against black people. Issa's attempts at changing the school's policy were successful. That is why the media have a significant role in helping minorities to voice their rights.

Hair discrimination in this film hurts Ama and Thema. Thema frequently worries about her daughter's appearance is out of school policy. Ama always feels fear and is ostracized and cannot be free to express herself because of being hermit by the policies at hand.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the above study, the application of John Fiske's theory of racism in the short film "Good Hair: Perceptions of Racism" lies in the visible levels of reality that the codes of looks, expressions, and gestures. Through the level of representation, shown in the camera code dominated by medium shot, by using this technique, the details of body language and object expression can be visible. In the ideology, the results of a level of reality and representation of the attitudes and dialogues of certain characters reflect the behavior of racism. The racism reflected in this short film is a restriction on black people's rights and freedom to express themselves through their hairstyle. In this film, white citizens feel so superior, and all the standards and policies that exist should conform to their culture.

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