

Audience Responses to News Media Images of Pacific Health

Robert Loto

University of Waikato

News media contain a multitude of images of Pacific peoples and health. This paper presents findings from a social psychological study of audience responses to such images. Two Pacific and two Palagi groups took part in discussions in which they responded to specific print media articles. These discussions were used to explore how different New Zealand audiences view and respond to the portrayals of Pacific people and their health. Responses from the Pacific and Palagi focus groups were compared showing both salience and difference in audience reactions. In appropriating aspects of news coverage, audience members do not simply regurgitate what they are shown by the media. They engage in complex dialogues with other audience members regarding issues raised by media coverage and in the process socially negotiate shared interpretations.

Introduction

This symposium paper is derived from my thesis entitled 'Pacific Islanders and Health in the Print News Media'. The primary focus of this presentation is to convey thesis findings around audience responses elicited through focus group conversation about Pacific health and representation in the Aotearoa/New Zealand media. Although audience responses was the key theme, it was also important to present thesis findings around media representation of Pacific people and their health. Therefore, this paper will firstly and briefly outline a media analysis of Pacific people and their health and then audience responses to such media coverage.

Media Analysis

Mediated experiences and reports diagnosing social relationships, characterizing marginalized groups, and offering prescriptions for addressing social concerns are a feature of everyday life. It was found that a great number of these mediated contents evolved around the dynamics of health. Although mass media content around health issues are widely reported, it is rather limited in scope of health with coverage of minority cultural groups like Pacific Islanders.

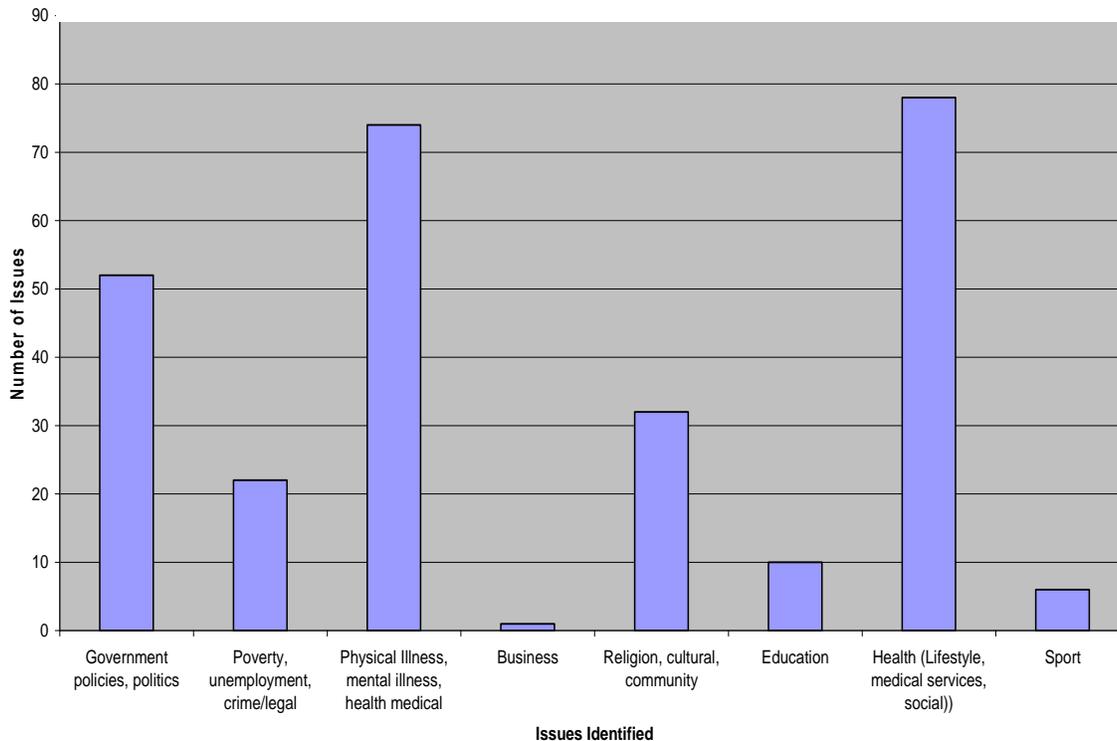
Before engaging with audiences, it was important to analyse the media in the way it depicted Pacific people and their health. A collection of 65 articles were compiled over a three-month search period for Pacific related articles. The print items were collated from two major national daily newspapers (New Zealand Herald and Dominion Post) and the highest weekend circulation (The Sunday Star Times). The mass media source of print news items was selected for reasons of accessibility and because print journalism is recognized as a forum for serious and objective discussions. Print articles are longer and present a broader range of facts and views for its audience compared to other sources (Thorson, 2006; W. Harawira, personal communication, February 15, 2007).

Media Analysis Findings

The following figures illustrate prominent trends of media representation of Pacific people and their health. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the issues that the reports referred to. The vast majority of these reports were related to aspects of health with high references and association of Pacific people to health concerns like physical and mental illness.

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

Figure 1: Issues covered in news items

The attributes identified for reviewing the articles within Figures 2 and 3 were personally derived. These tended to be the terms that best captured the essence of the position in which Pacific health and representation were portrayed in the coverage. The articles were examined for common racist and stereotypical assumptions such as Pacific people being poorly educated, lazy, violent, substance abusers and economically dependent. Figure 2 illustrates high prevalence of news articles associating Pacific people with negative attributes. The largest category comprises of 52 specific references to Pacific people as unproductive foreigners or as inferior others, whose place in Aotearoa is under review.

In contrast, Figure 3 analyses the news reports for positive attributes such as Pacific people being hardworking, generous, physically active and honest the graph highlights comparatively low accounts for such attributes. Overall, positive

attributes associated with Pacific people were only evident in 31% of all the articles.

One of the key factors to review as a community psychologist is the issue of power; dominance and allocation of voice to speak. Figure 4 directly addresses such themes by examining the issue around the power to identify and define Pacific issues. The categories of the sources cited eventuated from the articles themselves and included both Pacific and non-Pacific voices. In consideration of who was afforded the right to speak on behalf of Pacific issues, 19% of all the articles employed Pacific people as the “expert voices”, who were generally limited to sportspeople, artists and community leaders. In contrast, the main category that was identified as having the most mediated voices for commentary on Pacific issues were those that were non-Pacific from positions of charity, government and local council representatives; health professionals; and researchers.

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

Figure 2: Negative attributes associated with Pacific people in news items

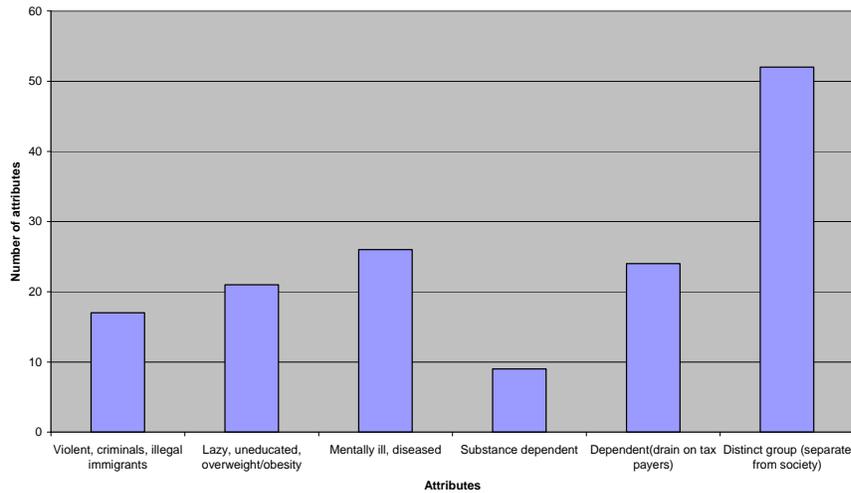


Figure 3: Positive attributes associated with Pacific people in news items

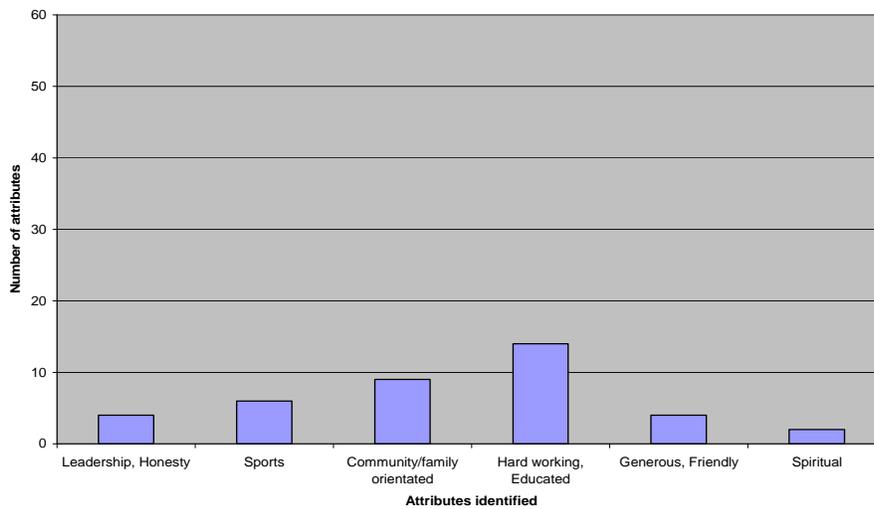
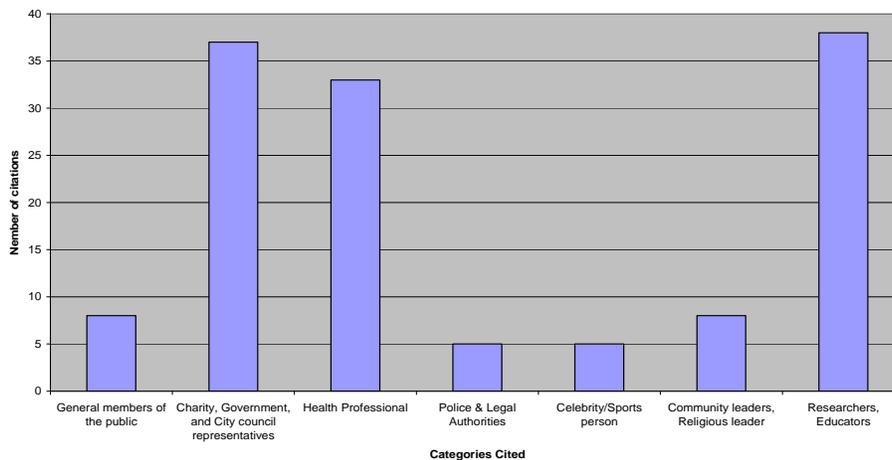


Figure 4: Sources cited in news items



Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

Summary

While it is necessary for the media to raise health and social issues for public consideration, the representation of Pacific people in this way is of concern. There is a comprehensive imbalance of print media coverage of Pacific identity and health. Simply, there is excessively more negative coverage associated with Pacific people. The consistent negative media images of Pacific representation and health are reflective of the media's limited definition of health. The dominant views and perspectives of mediated health messages are structured around medical views and healthy lifestyle practices.

Previous research (Macpherson, Spoonley & Anae, 2001; Nairn, Pega, McCreanor, Rankie & Barnes, 2006) highlights how the positive achievements of minority groups are downplayed or ignored in mainstream media, and often their 'problems' direct the attention of coverage. However, this is only partially supported by the analysis presented here, as positive representations of Pacific success also occur in New Zealand print news. In spite of this, the positive representations of Pacific people promote exceptions to the rule, presenting individuals who are newsworthy because they have succeeded within the Palagi world of sport, fashion and the arts.

Prominent trends in coverage (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2006; Wallack, 2003; Hodgetts, Masters & Robertson, 2004), including those identified in this analysis, facilitate constrained and domineering relationships between social groups. A particularly worrying finding from the analyses is the lack of space for Pacific people to speak for themselves beyond quite restrictive roles, and how they are displaced from their own stories. Media analysis suggests that coverage currently serves the need for positive self-identity of the Palagi majority. This invokes concerns about who gets to speak, for whom, and to whom. At present it would appear that Palagi professionals and journalists are speaking on behalf of Pacific people to a Palagi public.

Need for Audience Research

Although media analysis alludes to a politics of difference, it does not however explore the

marginalization of immigrant groups or consider its impact on people's lives. There is a particular shortage of examination of media representation regarding ethnic minority groups like Pacific Islanders, and also audience responses to such representations. Therefore the impetus for conducting audience responses was to explore how different New Zealand audiences viewed and responded to the portrayals of Pacific people and health in print news media. Audience responses provide an exploration into minority groups that is often ignored in terms of the audience's own views as to how they are portrayed. Audience views through discussions are used to provide insight into how both Pacific and Palagi groups interpret media portrayals of Pacific people and their health concerns. The discussions allow for documentation to see if the media's role in defining and portraying Pacific people and how their health actually influences the framing of their own views.

Analysis of Audience Response

Insight into audience views and interpretations were gained using four focus group discussions. Two Pacific and two Palagi groups with six participants each (n=24), were derived to allow for documentation of specific ways which audience members engage and negotiate interpretations to media items, by offering and responding to the views of others. The Pacific groups were facilitated by myself whereas the Palagi were managed by a Palagi colleague who is well rehearsed with Pacific cultures. This was initiated to overcome concerns that Palagi audience participants would be reluctant to be open and direct with a Pacific facilitator present.

The discussion forum was constructed into two parts. The first part invited participants to talk about their own general views about media portrayal of Pacific people and their health. These discussions were not limited to print news and allowed people to frame their own interpretations using the greater mass media world. The second part of the focus group discussions placed greater emphasis on audience views and interpretations around Pacific representation and health by responding to three specific articles assigned. The three articles are:

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

1. *Thinner fitter runner has the last laugh*
2. *Browning of kiwi sport*
3. *A matter of respect*

The articles were selected from a total of 65 collated items in my the media analysis section. They were used to stimulate thoughts about what attributes are associated with Pacific people, both positive and negative. The items provided numerous dimensions with subtle and complex issues embedded within its texts for group members to engage and interact with.

Articles

This first article '*Thinner fitter runner has the last laugh*', is based on health and explores the transformation of a once obese Pacific man to a trim marathon runner. The content of the item allowed for responses to be directly about Pacific health and representation. Health issues addressed in this article included obesity, unhealthy lifestyles and challenges around Pacific health.

The other two articles '*Browning of kiwi sport*' and '*A matter of respect*', although do not specifically discuss Pacific health, it does offer the need for wider consideration of Pacific health (Wallack 2003). Often health is concentrated on in-light with medical and healthy living lifestyles (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2006; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003), and social health determinants like participation, racism, social exclusion, empowerment and social relationships are often ignored. These two articles are based on Pacific involvement, participation and contribution to New Zealand sports, music and fashion. The content of the articles allow for a shift from the common constructions and boundaries surrounding health to a more in-depth conversation about wider social determinants impacting on Pacific health and identity.

Findings

For the first part of the focus group discussions where participants talked generally about media representation of Pacific people and their health, it was found that there is a prominent association of Pacific people with sports and entertainment. Responses were littered with references to Pacific All

Black figures like Tana Umaga, Jonah Lomu; Hip Hop artists; television shows like *Dancing with stars*, *Bro Town* and *New Zealand Idol* which have a strong presence of Pacific faces.

The discussions also showed that Palagi participants talked more about negative associations of Pacific people with images around violence, alcoholism and unhealthy lifestyles. Palagi audiences highlighted their own deficient levels of personal knowledge around Pacific health and identity. In situations where they lacked insight to comment about specific issues relating to Pacific people, they would then reflect and often perpetuate mediated coverage. Concerns of media imbalance in its portrayal of minority people is evident, as mediated coverage are used to help negotiate ones interpretations. In the Pacific audience groups, although they were aware of these particular negative portrayals, they wanted to use the discussion forum to talk more about positive Pacific contributions and success. One of the key learning outcomes from this section of discussion was the notion that meanings people assign to health are not just invented on the spur of the moment. Participants, in terms of negotiating their own meanings and understandings around health, consider a combination of complex systems that are inclusive of cultural perspectives, personal lifestyles, and belief systems, which all contribute to the framing of ones ideas.

Thinner, fitter runner has last laugh

Discussions about this article showed that differences are apparent between Pacific and Palagi interpretations of factors that are important to health. For example, the two groups had opposing ideas of what constituted as the ideal body weight and about determinants of health. The Pacific groups invoked the notion that Palagi often have a different perspective and definition of health compared to their own. Palagi audiences continuously framed health in terms of factors such as living free of pain, access to medication resources, living a healthy lifestyle with reference to exercising and eating right. They generally saw health in terms of the biomedical structures, which tend to dominate media coverage. These audience responses reflect previous research claims that the media reflects aspects of the medical,

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

lifestyle and socio-structural approaches prevailing in the community and political scene. Although Pacific audiences commented on similar factors identified by Palagi members, they referred to more holistic and social factors pertaining to health like family, spiritual, and social relationships. The Palagi comments contrasted those of the Pacific groups in terms of the extent and depth of the discussion that the Pacific participants engaged in to deconstruct ideas around health.

Browning of kiwi sport

This article invoked issues of participation, race relations, power, influence and racism within rugby, which extended to further talks about discrimination and exclusion. Both Pacific and Palagi focus groups opposed the issue alluded to in the article about Pacific people being very talented athletes but are incompetent, uneducated and would be exhausted by the skills and knowledge required for administrative/decision-making positions. Pacific participants were very knowledgeable about how their success in sports was confined to the playing fields and for the purpose of entertainment. This led to further criticisms of the media's role in framing representations of Pacific people in a manner impacting on race relations, on the issue of access to power, and the nature of participation in society. Pacific participants emphasized the importance of recognizing that differences in culture also constituted to differences in health. Pacific views reflected the need for the media to attain and represent a wider notion of health to include aspects of life such as levels of social participation and racism.

Another key discussion to evolve from this article was in terms of the alarming concern about the lack of scope of media representation of Pacific people. Audience conversations, particularly those by Palagi participants were rather restricted to the areas of entertainment and sport. Such responses supported previous suggesting that the media often confined minority groups within fixed boundaries. Both groups acknowledge the need for more complex and reflective representation of Pacific people in New Zealand. Palagi participants often expressed claims of how media coverage of Pacific academics, doctors, authors, and judges for example is non-existent.

A matter of respect

This news article, based on Pacific success in the hip-hop music industry, allowed for wider interpretations of health issues surrounding economic participation and inclusion. The main theme to develop from the discussions was the noticeable differences with talks about the use of terms like 'Dawnraid' and 'Overstayer' as clothing and music labels. Some Palagi participants viewed the adoption of such terms for labels as Pacific people mocking themselves. The other small number of Palagi participants agreed with Pacific interpretations of such labels as a clever promotion twist of using negative historical events to empower Pacific identity. These conflicting views about Pacific involvement in hip-hop and street culture illustrated the lack of historical knowledge by some Palagi participants about the origins of such terms.

This difference in view highlighted the importance of having some understanding of cultural and social knowledge about minority groups when viewing and interpreting media images about them. The lack of knowledge about Pacific related issues by Palagi members was evident in situations where their explanations and accounts of interpretation relied more on media coverage than actual life experience.

Summary of Media and Audience Analysis

Audience responses confirm that both Pacific and Palagi participants are highly skilled at negotiating between media and interpersonal sources of information for own interpretations and meanings. Although media consumers are not passive to mediated messages, the coverage does however help to frame participant's views. People's negotiated meanings are not one-dimensional but are rather inclusive of complex processes and thinking. In regards to health both Pacific and Palagi participants appeared to be drawing and integrating media constructed information into their conversations and for making sense of Pacific identity and health. Thus, a key finding from the audience responses is that media coverage provided Palagi participants with some understanding of Pacific people and their health. Therefore, the media's role in defining and portraying minorities is influential to how they

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

themselves and other social groups understand and interpret one another.

A key contrast between Pacific and Palagi audiences were evident in their scope of explanations. It was noticeable that participant's socio-cultural backgrounds shaped their depth of knowledge and ultimately their response. Palagi focus groups often used and regurgitated views about Pacific people and their health from what they have experienced through the media. Although Pacific members were alert to these media coverage, they often disputed and offered alternative explanations as a reflection on their own views. These responses coincide with previous research findings (Giles, 2003; Livingstone, 1998) proposing that audiences draw not only on the mass media but also their own existing views when renegotiating understandings.

The media is an important but often ignored influential component to people's health. Findings provide need to review the media's role in portraying Pacific people as it undermines Pacific health and existence. The continuation of current trends of media representation marginalizes Pacific people and their health status; consolidating already stereotypical views. Both Palagi and Pacific participants raised the issue about the need for more complex portrayals of Pacific people outside of current stereotypes. Pacific people live in a wider range of occupational and social contexts, and these representations need to be better understood and portrayed.

Some thoughts to moving forward

The findings of this thesis show that there are cultural differences in media representation and interpretation of Pacific coverage. As a result, one of the recommendations of this research as a way forward is to establish a networking relationship between Pacific communities, leaders and experts with media journalists. There is a need to critically review the professional practice of media reporting. A networking relationship between the media and Pacific communities will enable civic reporting by encouraging participation and addressing issues that affect the health wellbeing of our communities.

As psychologists we need to remind ourselves that such efforts aimed at enhancing civic participation through the media are not solely the responsibility of Pacific communities. Discrimination is a problem owned by entire societies, and it requires citizens to work together to support, change, and challenge discriminatory practices.

Our roles should include encouraging collaboration and networking relationships by offering support to groups who are working to foster a morally and politically literate public, whose deliberations are informed by more than the common sense views of the dominant group. This involves a domain of practice in which we work with and assist those challenging symbolic power by promoting and encouraging media coverage of marginalized perspectives about social and health concerns. This research contributes to this agenda by documenting the limitations of current coverage in print news portrayals of Pacific people and by providing a basis for dialogue with Pacific media activists and professionals.

Concluding comments: Pacific people claiming spaces

My research has highlighted a lack of space for Pacific people to frame and speak out or challenge the restrictive media depictions of themselves, and the displacement of Pacific peoples from their own stories. My findings implore Pacific people to 'claim spaces', to participate and take action to address the notable margin of consideration of their own identity and health within the media.

The media is a vehicle for social change and is a symbolic resource for establishing identity. Therefore, minority groups like Pacific people need to participate and use the media to claim ownership in addressing their own considerations.

Findings therefore reflect Pacific journalist Tapu Misa's comments about the mainstream media:

The media has tremendous potential to influence and shape opinions and views, and to contribute to positive social change. When you have a mainstream media with little understanding of Maori or Pacific cultures, inevitably there's little sympathy and support for our causes. (cited in Van der Zwan, 2003, p8).

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.

I share in her bigger vision for Pacific people to claim space in the media. Pacific people need to bring their fragmented voices together to conquer the

mainstream media and in the words of Tapu Misa, “infect it with our brownness” (cited in Van der Zwan, 2003, p24).

References

- Campbell, C., & Jovchelovitch, S. (2000). Health, community and development: Towards a social psychology of participation. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 10*, 255–270.
- Comstock, G., & Sharrer, E. (2005). *The psychology of media and politics*. USA: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Giles, D. (2003). *Media Psychology*. New Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
- Hodgetts, D., & Chamberlain, K. (2006). Media and health: A continuing concern for health psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology, 11*, 171-174.
- Hodgetts, D., Masters, B., & Robertson, N. (2004). Media coverage of ‘Decades of Disparity’ in ethnic mortality trends in Aotearoa. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 14*, 1–18.
- Livingstone, S. (1998). *Making sense of television: The psychology of audience interpretation* (2ndEd). New York: Routledge.
- Macpherson, C., Spoonley, P., & Anae, M. (2001). *Tangata o te moana nui: The evolving identities of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore.
- Nairn, R., Pega, F., McCreanor, T., Rankine, J., & Barnes, A. (2006). Media, racism and public health psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology, 11*, 183-196.
- Prilleltensky, I., & Prilleltensky, O. (2003). Towards a critical health psychology practice. *Journal of Health Psychology, 8*, 197–210.
- Spoonley, P. (1990). Racism, race relations and the media. In P. Spoonley, & W. Hirsh (Eds.), *Between the lines: Racism and the New Zealand media* (pp. 26-37). Auckland: Heinemann Reed.
- Taouma, L. (2004). Gauguin is dead...There is no paradise. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 25*, 35-4
- Thorson, E. (2006). Print news and health psychology: Some observations. *Journal of Health Psychology, 11*, 175-182.
- Van der Zwan, S. (2003, October 10). Tapu Misa calls for ‘bigger vision’ for Pacific media. *Pasifika Media News*. Retrieved June 9, 2006 from <http://artsweb.aut.ac.nz/Journalism/pima/articles/2003/01tapumi.html>
- Wallack, L. (2003). The role of mass media in creating social capital: A new direction for public health. In R. Hofrichter (Ed.), *Health and social justice: Politics, ideology, and inequality in the distribution of disease* (pp. 594–625). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Extracted From:

Levy, M., Nikora, L.W., Masters-Awatere, B., Rua, M.R., Waitoki, W. (2008). *Claiming Spaces: Proceedings of the 2007 National Maori and Pacific Psychologies Symposium, 23-24 November, Hamilton*. Hamilton: Maori and Psychology Research Unit.