

Prejudice, Identity, and Social Acceptance in Z-O-M-B-I-E-S (2018): A Critical Film Analysis

Aura Wida Rofahima^{1*}, Nurmalia Gemor²

^{1,2}Universitas Pendidikan Muhammadiyah Sorong

*Corresponding author, E-mail: aurawida26@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to critically analyze the representation of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance in the Disney film Z-O-M-B-I-E-S (2018), directed by Paul Hoen. Although the film is widely recognized for its entertaining and educational value, there is still limited analytical research that explores how these social themes are constructed through characters and symbolic elements. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on character development, narrative conflict, and symbolism. The findings show that prejudice is portrayed as a systemic issue embedded in social structures, particularly through the segregation between humans and zombies in Seabrook. Identity is reflected in the transformation of the main characters, Addison and Zed, who challenge social expectations and redefine their roles within society. Social acceptance is depicted as a gradual process achieved through interaction, empathy, and the breakdown of stereotypes. In addition, symbolic elements such as the Z-Band represent social control and discrimination, while visual differences function as markers of otherness. The study concludes that Z-O-M-B-I-E-S presents a simplified but meaningful representation of complex social issues. It highlights the importance of tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for diversity, making the film relevant as both a cultural text and an educational resource.

Keywords: Prejudice; Identity; Social Acceptance; Film Analysis; Z-O-M-B-I-E-S; Symbolism

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Introduction

Film is not only a form of entertainment but also a powerful medium for representing social realities and shaping public understanding of cultural values. Through narrative structure, characterization, and visual symbolism, films communicate complex social issues in ways that are accessible to diverse audiences. In recent years, scholars have emphasized that films, especially those targeting younger audiences, play an important role in promoting values such as tolerance, empathy, and inclusivity while simplifying complex societal problems (Kellner & Share, 2019; Livingstone, 2018; Storey, 2021). As a result, film can be understood as both a cultural product and an educational tool that reflects and constructs social meaning.

One film that reflects these functions is Z-O-M-B-I-E-S (2018), directed by Paul Hoen. The film is set in the fictional town of Seabrook, where humans and zombies live in segregated communities. The integration of zombie students into a human high school becomes the central conflict, highlighting issues such as discrimination, fear of difference, and social exclusion. These issues parallel real-world phenomena, including racial segregation, stereotyping, and the marginalization of minority groups. Recent studies on media representation suggest that fictional narratives often mirror real social inequalities and provide a space to challenge dominant ideologies (Hall, 2017; Hooks, 2015; Kellner & Share, 2019).

Furthermore, the concept of representation explains how media constructs meaning through symbols, language, and cultural practices. Representation is not simply a reflection of reality but an active process that shapes how audiences perceive identity and difference (Hall, 2017). In addition, recent research highlights that youth-oriented media, particularly those using fantasy and musical elements, are effective in delivering moral and social messages because they engage audiences emotionally while presenting complex issues in simplified forms (Buckingham, 2015; Marsh, 2016; Potter, 2019). This makes Z-O-M-B-I-E-S a relevant text for examining how social themes are communicated through entertainment.

However, despite its popularity and educational potential, existing discussions of Z-O-M-B-I-E-S remain largely descriptive and focus mainly on its entertainment value. There is still limited critical analysis that examines how the film constructs the themes of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance through character development, narrative conflict, and symbolic elements. Previous studies tend to discuss media representation in general contexts rather than focusing on this specific film or exploring its deeper cultural implications. This gap indicates the need for a more focused and analytical study that connects theoretical perspectives with detailed textual analysis.

Therefore, this study aims to critically analyze the representation of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance in Z-O-M-B-I-E-S (2018) by examining its characters, conflicts, and symbolic elements. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How are prejudice, identity, and social acceptance represented through character development, narrative conflict, and symbolism in the film Z-O-M-B-I-E-S (2018)? This study is expected to contribute to film studies and cultural analysis by providing a deeper understanding of how popular films construct social meaning. In addition, it offers practical implications for education, particularly in using film as a medium to promote critical thinking about diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

Literature Review

a. Film as a Medium of Social Representation

Film is widely recognized as a powerful medium for representing and interpreting social realities. It communicates meaning through narrative structure, visual elements, and character development, allowing audiences to engage with complex social issues in accessible ways (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Storey, 2021). Recent studies highlight that film functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that reflects and shapes societal values, norms, and power relations (Kellner & Share, 2019; Livingstone, 2018). This role becomes more significant in films aimed at young audiences, where moral messages are often embedded in simplified narratives to promote social awareness and empathy.

Representation theory explains how meaning in media is actively constructed through language, symbols, and cultural practices (Hall, 2017). Media texts do not simply reflect reality but shape how audiences understand identity, difference, and social relationships. Recent research also emphasizes that visual media can influence audience perceptions by reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies (Orgad, 2019; Couldry, 2020). In the context of Z-O-M-B-I-E-S (2018), the portrayal of zombies and humans can be interpreted as symbolic representations of marginalized and dominant groups. This makes the film relevant for examining how social meanings about difference and inclusion are constructed through popular media.

b. Prejudice and Discrimination in Media

Prejudice and discrimination are central themes in many media narratives, often represented through conflicts between dominant and marginalized groups. Prejudice refers to negative attitudes based on group identity, while discrimination refers to actions that disadvantage certain groups. In contemporary media studies, these issues are frequently analyzed in relation to power, representation, and social inequality (Hall, 2017; Hooks, 2015). Recent studies show that popular media plays a key role in shaping audience attitudes toward diversity and inclusion (Kellner & Share, 2019; Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). Youth-oriented media, including Disney films, often address issues of prejudice through simplified narratives that highlight moral lessons such as acceptance and equality (Potter, 2019). However, scholars also argue that such representations may oversimplify complex social problems (Couldry, 2020). In Z-O-M-B-I-E-S, the separation between humans and zombies reflects real-world issues such as segregation and stereotyping. The gradual acceptance of zombies illustrates how media narratives can promote empathy while also simplifying the process of social change.

c. Identity and Character Development

Identity is a key concept in film and literary analysis, especially in narratives that explore social differences and transformation. Characters often experience development as they face internal and external conflicts related to their sense of self. Recent research highlights that character-driven

narratives are effective in shaping audience understanding of identity and social roles (Storey, 2021; Barker, 2018).

Dynamic characters, who undergo significant change throughout a story, are particularly important in representing identity formation. Their development reflects broader social processes such as negotiation, resistance, and self-acceptance (Hall, 2017; Kellner & Share, 2019). In *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S*, Addison and Zed demonstrate this process clearly. Addison moves from conformity to critical awareness, while Zed negotiates between social acceptance and personal authenticity. Their character development illustrates how identity is shaped through interaction with social norms and expectations. This supports recent findings that character transformation in media can promote empathy and critical reflection among audiences (Livingstone, 2018).

d. Symbolism in Film

Symbolism is an important element in film because it allows abstract ideas to be communicated through visual and narrative forms. Symbols such as objects, colors, and actions carry deeper meanings that contribute to the overall message of a film. Representation theory explains that symbols play a key role in constructing meaning and influencing audience interpretation (Hall, 2017). Recent studies in media and film analysis emphasize that symbolic elements help audiences understand complex social issues by making them more concrete and relatable (Barker, 2018; Orgad, 2019). In *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S*, symbolic elements are used to represent social concepts related to prejudice and identity. The Z-Band symbolizes control and institutional discrimination, while physical differences such as green skin function as markers of otherness. In addition, elements like cheerleading uniforms represent conformity to social norms. These symbols support the narrative by reinforcing themes of exclusion, identity negotiation, and social acceptance, making the film suitable for critical analysis.

e. Educational Value of Media

Recent research shows that films and other media can function as effective educational tools, especially in teaching social and moral values. Media-based learning encourages students to engage critically with content, improving their analytical and interpretive skills (Buckingham, 2015; Kellner & Share, 2019). Fantasy narratives, in particular, are considered effective because they present complex issues in imaginative and engaging ways (Marsh, 2016; Potter, 2019). In the context of education, film analysis has been widely used to support learning in areas such as language development, cultural understanding, and critical thinking (Livingstone, 2018; Couldry, 2020). By analyzing characters, themes, and symbols, students can develop deeper insights into social issues and media representation. Therefore, analyzing *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* not only contributes to film and cultural studies but also supports its application as a pedagogical tool. The film provides opportunities for learners to explore themes of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in an engaging and accessible way.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the representation of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance in the film *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* (2018), directed by Paul Hoen. A qualitative approach was used because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, themes, and symbolic elements presented in the film rather than generating numerical data. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how social issues are constructed through characters, narrative conflict, and visual representation. The primary data source of this study was the film *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* (2018). The data included dialogues, character interactions, scenes, and visual symbols that reflect issues related to prejudice, identity formation, and social acceptance. Secondary data were obtained from relevant books and recent scholarly articles on film analysis, media representation, and cultural studies to support the theoretical framework.

Data collection was conducted through systematic observation and note-taking. The film was watched several times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its content. During this process, important scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements were identified and recorded. The selected data were then organized based on the main themes of the study: prejudice, identity, and social acceptance. Data analysis followed the stages of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), with clearer operational steps. First, data familiarization was conducted by repeatedly watching the film and

reviewing the notes. Second, initial coding was carried out by labeling relevant scenes and dialogues that represent key issues such as discrimination, identity struggle, and acceptance. Third, categorization was conducted by grouping similar codes into broader themes. Fourth, theme development was performed by identifying patterns and relationships among the categories. Fifth, interpretation was carried out by linking the identified themes with relevant theories, especially representation theory and characterization theory, to explain how meaning is constructed in the film. Finally, conclusion drawing was conducted by synthesizing the findings into coherent explanations of how the film represents social issues.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were applied. First, prolonged engagement was achieved through repeated viewing of the film to gain a deep understanding of the data. Second, theoretical triangulation was used by applying multiple theoretical perspectives, such as representation theory and characterization theory, to support the analysis. Third, peer checking was conducted by discussing the coding and interpretation with colleagues to reduce subjectivity. Fourth, thick description was applied by providing detailed explanations of scenes and symbols to support the findings. These strategies help ensure that the analysis is credible, consistent, and well-supported.

Result

The analysis of *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* (2018) shows that the themes of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance are closely connected and developed through characters, conflicts, and symbolic elements. To present the findings more clearly, the results are organized into four main themes.

1. Prejudice as a Systemic Social Issue

The findings show that prejudice is the central issue that drives the narrative conflict. In the town of Seabrook, humans and zombies are separated through strict social rules, which reflect a system of discrimination. Zombies are viewed as dangerous and inferior, and this belief is reinforced by school policies and community attitudes. For example, when zombie students first enter Seabrook High School, they are treated with suspicion and fear by human students. Several scenes show humans avoiding interaction with zombies and expressing negative assumptions about their behavior. In addition, the requirement for zombies to wear the Z-Band demonstrates how prejudice operates at an institutional level. The device is used to control zombie behavior, showing that society does not trust them to act independently. This indicates that prejudice in the film is not only personal but also embedded in social structures.

2. Identity Development through Character Transformation

The results indicate that identity is developed through the transformation of the main characters, particularly Addison and Zed. Both characters experience internal and external conflicts that shape their sense of self. Addison begins as a character who follows social expectations, especially as a cheerleader who represents conformity. However, as she interacts with Zed and questions the treatment of zombies, she begins to challenge these norms. A key moment occurs when Addison openly supports the inclusion of zombies, showing her shift from passive acceptance to active advocacy. Zed, on the other hand, represents a marginalized identity. At the beginning of the film, he tries to adapt to human expectations in order to be accepted, especially by using the Z-Band to control his impulses. However, as the story progresses, he becomes more confident in his identity as a zombie and seeks equality rather than mere acceptance. His development reflects the struggle between conformity and authenticity.

3. Social Acceptance through Interaction and Understanding

The findings show that social acceptance in the film develops gradually through interaction and mutual understanding. The relationship between humans and zombies changes as they begin to recognize shared values such as friendship, ambition, and emotional expression. For instance, collaborative activities at school, including group interactions and shared experiences, help reduce fear and misunderstanding. The relationship between Addison and Zed plays an important role in bridging the gap between the two groups. Their interaction encourages other characters to reconsider their prejudices. In addition, moments of open dialogue in the film allow characters to express their feelings and perspectives. These interactions contribute to the breakdown of stereotypes and promote empathy. The resolution of the conflict suggests that acceptance is achieved through continuous engagement rather than instant change.

4. Symbolism as Representation of Social Meaning

Symbolic elements in the film strengthen the representation of social issues. One of the most significant symbols is the Z-Band, which represents control and discrimination. It regulates zombie behavior and reflects society's fear of difference, highlighting institutional power over marginalized groups. Another important symbol is the physical appearance of zombies, particularly their green skin. This visual difference acts as a marker of otherness and becomes the basis for prejudice and exclusion. It shows how visible traits can influence social perception and treatment. In contrast, cheerleading uniforms symbolize conformity and social expectations within the human group. Meanwhile, musical performances in the film represent freedom, unity, and emotional expression. These scenes often bring humans and zombies together, symbolizing the possibility of harmony despite differences.

Overall, the results show that *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* presents a structured representation of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance through interconnected narrative elements. The use of clear character development, social conflict, and symbolic representation helps communicate complex social issues in a way that is accessible to audiences.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* (2018) presents prejudice, identity, and social acceptance as interconnected themes that shape both the narrative and character development. These results can be better understood when compared with recent studies on media representation, youth-oriented films, and cultural narratives.

First, the portrayal of prejudice in the film reflects how media narratives construct social boundaries between dominant and marginalized groups. The segregation between humans and zombies in *Seabrook* represents a structured system of exclusion that is maintained through institutional rules and social attitudes. This finding is consistent with recent studies that argue that popular media often reproduces patterns of social inequality by normalizing "us versus them" distinctions (Tyler, 2020; Saha, 2018). However, unlike many films that reinforce stereotypes, *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* gradually challenges these divisions by humanizing the marginalized group. This supports the argument of Smith et al. (2020), who found that youth media can promote inclusive perspectives when minority characters are given agency and emotional depth. Therefore, the film not only reflects prejudice but also provides a space for questioning and transforming it.

Second, the findings related to identity development highlight the importance of character transformation in shaping audience understanding of social issues. Addison and Zed function as dynamic characters whose experiences reflect processes of negotiation, resistance, and self-acceptance. This aligns with recent research by Brown (2021), which shows that character-driven narratives in youth films help audiences engage emotionally with issues of identity and belonging. In addition, García (2020) emphasizes that identity in media is often constructed through interaction with social norms, which can either constrain or empower individuals. In the case of *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S*, Addison's shift from conformity to advocacy and Zed's movement from adaptation to self-assertion illustrate how identity is not fixed but continuously shaped by social context. These findings reinforce the idea that film narratives can serve as a medium for exploring identity formation in a way that is relatable to young audiences.

Third, the process of social acceptance in the film supports the idea that interaction plays a key role in reducing prejudice. The gradual change in relationships between humans and zombies suggests that acceptance is built through communication, shared experiences, and emotional connection. This is in line with the contact hypothesis, which suggests that interaction between different groups can reduce prejudice under certain conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2016). Recent studies also confirm that media representations of positive intergroup contact can influence audience attitudes toward diversity (Park, 2020; Lee & Paik, 2021). In *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S*, scenes involving collaboration and dialogue help reduce fear and misunderstanding, leading to a more inclusive social environment. However, the film presents this process in a relatively simplified way, which may not fully capture the complexity of real-world social change. As noted by Ahmed (2019), narratives of quick resolution can risk minimizing the structural nature of discrimination. Therefore, while the film promotes positive values, it should be interpreted critically.

Furthermore, the use of symbolism in the film strengthens the communication of social meanings. The Z-Band, for example, functions as a clear representation of institutional control and lack of trust

toward marginalized groups. This finding is supported by recent research that highlights the role of symbolic elements in visual media as tools for expressing complex social issues in accessible forms (Rose, 2022; Bateman & Schmidt, 2021). Visual markers such as green skin also demonstrate how physical differences can be used to construct social categories and justify exclusion. In this sense, the film reflects real-world practices where visible traits often become the basis for stereotyping. At the same time, symbolic elements such as music and performance represent unity and emotional expression, suggesting the possibility of overcoming social divisions. This dual use of symbolism shows that media texts can both reflect and challenge social realities.

In terms of educational implications, the findings suggest that *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* has strong potential as a pedagogical tool. The film presents complex social issues in a format that is engaging and accessible, making it suitable for use in classroom settings. Recent studies in education highlight that film-based learning can enhance students' critical thinking, cultural awareness, and engagement with social issues (Mills & Unsworth, 2018; Schneider, 2022). By analyzing characters, conflicts, and symbols, students can develop a deeper understanding of concepts such as prejudice, identity, and inclusion. In the context of English language teaching, the film can also support language skills development while encouraging discussion of meaningful topics. However, teachers need to guide students to critically reflect on the film's simplified representation of social change, so that learners can connect the narrative to more complex real-world contexts.

Despite these contributions, this study also recognizes certain limitations. The analysis focuses on a single film, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the interpretation is based on qualitative analysis, which may be influenced by the researcher's perspective. Future studies are recommended to examine similar themes across multiple films or to use different methodological approaches, such as audience reception studies, to explore how viewers interpret these representations.

In conclusion, this study shows that *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* provides a meaningful representation of prejudice, identity, and social acceptance through its narrative structure, character development, and symbolic elements. The film not only reflects social issues but also offers a framework for understanding and challenging them. At the same time, its simplified portrayal of social change highlights the importance of critical engagement, especially in educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study shows that *Z-O-M-B-I-E-S* (2018) represents prejudice, identity, and social acceptance through interconnected elements of narrative, character development, and symbolism. Prejudice is presented as a structured social issue embedded in rules, attitudes, and institutional practices, particularly through the separation between humans and zombies. Identity is constructed through the transformation of the main characters, Addison and Zed, who challenge social expectations and redefine their roles within society. Social acceptance is depicted as a gradual process that develops through interaction, understanding, and the breakdown of stereotypes. The use of symbolic elements, such as the Z-Band and visual differences, strengthens the film's ability to communicate complex social issues in a clear and accessible way. Although the film simplifies the resolution of conflict, it effectively promotes values of tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. These findings suggest that the film can function not only as entertainment but also as a useful resource for discussing social issues, particularly in educational contexts. However, this study is limited to the analysis of a single film and relies on qualitative interpretation. Future research should examine similar themes across different films or media texts to provide broader insights. In addition, further studies can explore audience responses or classroom applications to better understand how such films influence learners' perspectives on diversity and inclusion.

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