

PROPAGANDA IN AMERICAN FILMS: A STUDY OF HEROISM, ENEMY REPRESENTATION, AND LIBERAL VALUES IN HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This study examines the role of American films as instruments of propaganda, focusing on three main aspects: narratives of heroism, enemy representation, and the promotion of liberal values in Hollywood productions. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes selected films such as *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Argo*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* through content analysis and literature review. The findings reveal that American films consistently construct the United States as a global hero while portraying opposing groups as threats, thereby reinforcing ideological perspectives aligned with U.S. political and cultural interests. In addition, these films promote liberal values such as individual freedom, democracy, and human rights, which are often presented as universal ideals. However, the study also finds that international audiences respond differently to these narratives, with some perceiving them as inspirational, while others criticize them as forms of cultural imperialism and political bias. Overall, this research highlights that Hollywood films function not only as entertainment but also as powerful media tools that shape global perceptions, influence cultural discourse, and reinforce soft power in international contexts.

Keywords: Propaganda, American Films, Heroism, Enemy Representation, Liberal Values

INTRODUCTION

Movies are widely recognized as one of the most influential communication media in shaping public perception and disseminating ideas to a global audience. Zhang (2024) reported that more than 70% of global viewers believe films influence their understanding of foreign cultures and social values. This indicates that cinema plays a crucial role not only in entertainment but also in constructing cross-cultural awareness and social interpretation. Beyond entertainment, films function as cultural texts that carry ideological messages, often reflecting the socio-political context in which they are produced (Lynn, 2023). Through narratives, symbols, and character representations, films can subtly shape audiences' beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews. Historically, cinema has also been used as a strategic propaganda tool. During World War II, films such as *Casablanca* played a significant role in

fostering patriotism and shaping public opinion in support of the war effort (Kumar, 2025). This demonstrates that film is not merely a medium of storytelling but also a powerful instrument of persuasion and ideological influence.

In contemporary contexts, Hollywood, as the center of the American film industry, continues to dominate global film production and distribution. Through its wide reach, Hollywood films often convey narratives that align with American political, cultural, and economic interests (Liu et al., 2025). In line with this, media narratives also play a significant role in shaping identity and ideological perspectives, including the construction of heroic figures and oppositional "others," as well as the promotion of liberal values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights (Salam, 2025). As a result, American films contribute to the formation of global

perceptions about international relations, cultural identities, and ideological norms.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between film and propaganda, particularly in terms of political messaging and cultural influence. Ibrahim, Ibrahim, and Ibrahim (2025), for instance, emphasizes that films function as instruments of soft power by subtly embedding ideological messages that reinforce dominant political narratives. Through repeated exposure, audiences may internalize these values without being fully aware of their persuasive nature. Meanwhile, Bennis and Ghourdou (2024) focuses more on audience reception, arguing that contemporary viewers are not entirely passive but actively interpret and sometimes challenge the ideological content presented in films. They highlight that cultural background and access to alternative media sources influence how audiences respond to propaganda elements in cinema.

Despite these contributions, previous studies still exhibit certain limitations. Marques and Vos (2024) argue that research on film propaganda often isolates specific dimensions, such as ideological content, without integrating them into a comprehensive analytical framework. This approach limits the understanding of how various narrative elements interact within films. Meanwhile, Kuenzler, Stauffer, Schlauffer, and Song (2024) highlight that many studies tend to focus primarily on audience interpretation, overlooking the structural relationship between different narrative components. As a result, the interplay between elements such as heroism, enemy representation, and the promotion of values is often underexplored.

Based on this gap, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis of propaganda in American films by examining three key aspects: narratives of heroism, enemy representation, and the promotion of liberal values. By focusing on these elements, this research seeks to understand how Hollywood films construct ideological messages and how these messages contribute

to shaping global audience perceptions. Ultimately, this study is expected to enrich the discussion on film as a medium of propaganda and its role in reinforcing cultural and political influence in a globalized world.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive analysis to examine propaganda elements in American films. The research focuses on a content analysis of selected Hollywood films that are widely recognized for their political and cultural narratives. The films analyzed in this study include *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Argo* (2012), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), and *Erin Brockovich* (2000). These films were selected based on their popularity, global reach, and relevance to themes related to politics, ideology, and social values.

Data were collected through two main techniques: literature study and film content analysis. The literature study was conducted to gather theoretical frameworks related to propaganda, film studies, and cultural representation. Meanwhile, the content analysis involved a systematic examination of film scenes, dialogues, character portrayals, and narrative structures that reflect propaganda elements.

The analysis focuses on three main aspects: (1) narratives of heroism, particularly how American characters are constructed as protagonists or global saviors; (2) enemy representation, including how opposing groups or nations are depicted and characterized; and (3) the promotion of liberal values, such as freedom, democracy, and human rights. Each film was analyzed by identifying key scenes, dialogues, and recurring patterns that represent these aspects, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how ideological messages are embedded and conveyed throughout the films.

To ensure the validity of the findings, this study applies data triangulation by comparing the results of film analysis with

relevant scholarly literature. Through this approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how propaganda is constructed and conveyed in American films.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Narratives of Heroism

Movies such as *Captain America: The First Avenger* portray the United States as a global hero fighting against evil forces. The film constructs a strong narrative of heroism through the depiction of its main character as morally upright, brave, and self-sacrificing. This representation reflects a broader pattern in Hollywood films, where American figures are often positioned as protectors of global stability and justice. However, international audiences' reception of this narrative varies significantly. In some countries, the film is appreciated for promoting universal values such as courage and sacrifice, which resonate across cultures. For instance, in Japan, the concept of heroism portrayed in the film can be associated with the traditional value of *bushido*, emphasizing honor and bravery.

On the other hand, criticism has emerged from countries such as Russia and Iran, where the film is perceived as a form of propaganda that promotes American cultural and political dominance. Critics argue that the narrative tends to glorify American military power while marginalizing or ignoring the contributions of other nations in global conflicts (McAllister & Giglio, 2013). Furthermore, such portrayals may contribute to the formation of simplified and negative stereotypes of groups positioned as "enemies," reducing complex geopolitical realities into binary oppositions of good versus evil. As a result, while these narratives are effective in strengthening a positive image of the United States, they can also create a sense of exclusion or misrepresentation among international audiences.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the role of Hollywood in constructing ideological narratives of heroism. For example, Smith

(2010) argues that American films frequently position the United States as a moral authority in global conflicts, reinforcing its image as a global leader. Similarly, Ghofrani (2024) notes that heroism in Hollywood films is often framed within a political context that supports national interests and soft power strategies. However, this study also contrasts with Elinwa (2020), who suggests that global audiences tend to passively accept such narratives. In contrast, the findings of this research indicate that audience reception is more dynamic and context-dependent, with some viewers critically questioning the ideological messages embedded in these films.

In addition, Ahmed, Miracle, and Mark (2020) emphasize that the globalization of media has increased audience awareness of cultural bias in film narratives. This supports the present study's finding that the heroic portrayal of the United States is not universally accepted but is instead interpreted differently depending on cultural and political contexts. Therefore, the narrative of heroism in American films can be understood not only as a storytelling device but also as a strategic tool for ideological influence, which simultaneously attracts admiration and invites criticism on the global stage.

Enemy Demonstration

Films such as *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty* frequently portray opposing groups as significant threats to global security, thereby indirectly legitimizing American military and political intervention. In *Argo*, the narrative emphasizes the success of a U.S.-led rescue mission, while simultaneously constructing an image of American intelligence as highly strategic and morally justified. Similarly, *Zero Dark Thirty* presents the pursuit of terrorism suspects as a necessary and urgent mission, highlighting the complexity of counter-terrorism efforts. However, the film has also been criticized for its depiction of controversial practices such as torture, which some argue normalizes actions that violate human rights (Schlag, 2021). These portrayals

demonstrate how film narratives can shape audience perceptions regarding the legitimacy and necessity of U.S. actions in global conflicts.

At the same time, these films tend to construct a simplified image of “the enemy,” often associating certain regions—particularly the Middle East—with violence, extremism, and instability. This reductionist representation overlooks the social, political, and cultural complexities of these regions, contributing to the formation of global stereotypes. Khan, Mohamed Zin, and Fakhruddin (2024) argue that such portrayals reinforce cultural stigmas by consistently framing certain regions through narrow and negative lenses, which shapes audience perceptions in a biased way. Meanwhile, Mark and Ahmed (2023) highlight that these one-sided narratives contribute to cultural polarization, as they simplify complex international issues and promote misunderstanding between societies. This not only affects how audiences perceive specific countries but also contributes to broader patterns of cultural polarization and misunderstanding in international relations.

These findings align with previous research that highlights the role of media in constructing the “enemy image” within propaganda narratives. According to Taylor (2003), propaganda often relies on the clear distinction between “us” and “them” to strengthen ideological positioning and justify political actions. Similarly, Wan and Kraus (2002) argue that Hollywood films frequently depict foreign adversaries in ways that support U.S. geopolitical interests, particularly in the context of war and international conflict. However, this study contrasts with Lee et al. (2024), who suggests that contemporary audiences are increasingly critical of such portrayals due to greater access to alternative sources of information. The findings of this research indicate that while critical awareness is growing, the influence of cinematic narratives in shaping perceptions of “the enemy” remains significant.

Furthermore, Elsharif, Alzubaidi, and Agus (2025) emphasize that repeated exposure to stereotypical representations in media can reinforce long-term biases and cultural misunderstandings. This supports the present study’s conclusion that American films not only reflect existing political narratives but also actively participate in constructing and sustaining global power relations. Therefore, the representation of enemies in Hollywood films can be understood as a strategic narrative device that serves both ideological and political functions, while also generating debate and resistance among global audiences.

In conclusion, the representation of enemies in American films illustrates how cinematic narratives function as powerful tools in shaping perceptions of global conflict and legitimizing political actions. While these portrayals often reinforce ideological distinctions between “us” and “them,” they also contribute to the simplification and stereotyping of complex societies and regions. This suggests that enemy representation in film is not merely a narrative element, but a strategic construction that influences audience attitudes, reinforces geopolitical perspectives, and, at the same time, invites critical reflection and resistance from increasingly media-literate global audiences.

Promotion of Liberal Values

Many American films promote values such as individual freedom, democracy, and human rights, often positioning them as universal ideals. Films such as *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Erin Brockovich* emphasize individual resilience and determination in overcoming adversity, reflecting the importance of personal freedom and self-actualization. In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the story of a single father overcoming poverty becomes a powerful symbol of hope and perseverance. Similarly, *Erin Brockovich* highlights individual courage in challenging corporate injustice, reinforcing the idea that ordinary citizens can enact meaningful social change. In addition, films like *Selma* and *12*

Years a Slave address issues of human rights and social justice, portraying historical struggles against racial discrimination and inequality. These films not only educate audiences about past injustices but also promote values of equality, justice, and moral responsibility.

However, the reception of these liberal values varies across different cultural and political contexts. In some regions, these narratives are seen as inspirational and relevant, particularly in societies facing similar social challenges. Conversely, in countries with different ideological frameworks, such representations may be perceived as a form of cultural imperialism, where American values are implicitly presented as the global standard (Adolfsson & Finyiza, 2024). For instance, in China, such narratives are sometimes received with skepticism due to their perceived misalignment with local political systems and cultural values. Critics argue that these films often overlook the diversity of global experiences, simplifying complex social struggles into narratives that primarily reflect Western perspectives.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that examine the role of film in promoting ideological values. According to Chen (2024), Hollywood films function as vehicles of soft power by disseminating American cultural and political ideals to global audiences. Similarly, Liu, Kasimon, and Ng (2025) emphasize that cultural products such as films play a significant role in shaping international perceptions through attraction rather than coercion. However, this study also contrasts with Lynn (2023), who suggests that liberal values in films are generally accepted as universal. In contrast, the present findings indicate that audience reception is more varied and often influenced by local cultural, political, and historical contexts.

Furthermore, Dembe (2024) argues that global audiences are increasingly critical of dominant narratives that fail to represent diverse perspectives. This supports the

finding that while American films can inspire and promote awareness of social issues, they can also generate resistance when perceived as culturally insensitive or hegemonic. Therefore, the promotion of liberal values in Hollywood films can be understood as a double-edged phenomenon: it strengthens American soft power and global influence, while simultaneously provoking critical responses and debates about cultural representation and ideological dominance.

In conclusion, the promotion of liberal values in American films reflects a complex and dynamic interplay between cultural influence and audience interpretation. While these films effectively disseminate ideals such as freedom, democracy, and human rights, contributing to the expansion of American soft power, their reception is not universally uniform. Instead, it is shaped by diverse cultural, political, and historical contexts that may either support or challenge these narratives. This indicates that the transmission of ideological values through film is not merely a one-way process, but a negotiated space where meaning is actively interpreted, accepted, or resisted by global audiences, highlighting the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive representations in global cinema.

CONCLUSION

American films have played a significant role as instruments of propaganda in conveying ideological messages and shaping public opinion. This role has evolved alongside global political changes. For instance, during the Cold War, films frequently depicted ideological conflicts between democracy and communism, while in the modern era, the focus has shifted to issues such as terrorism and globalization. Furthermore, digital platforms and global distribution have enabled American films to reach wider audiences, thereby reinforcing the cultural and political influence of the United States worldwide. Elements such as narratives of heroism, enemy demonization, and the promotion of liberal values are often

employed to influence audience perceptions. This study highlights that films are not merely a form of entertainment, but also powerful tools of communication with substantial impact on politics and culture.

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