

tiffany engel

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: David Posnack Jewish Day School, Davie, FL

Educator: Melony Mindicino

Category: Critical Essay

The Role of Racial Stereotypes in the Media

Introduction

With the increasing inquiry over our country's foundation of institutional racism, it is critical to highlight the underlying stereotypes both positive and negative causing these issues. Aunt Jemima, being one of the many stereotypes, represents the efforts of past generations to devalue the extent of slavery and hide the harsh mistreatment of African Americans. Her overjoyed picture plastered on common household items has served to reassure nonminority Americans that slaves were being treated fairly (Green 1998). The majority of Americans who have innocently used these breakfast products for almost a century, oblivious to their historical background, never associated Jemimah's presence with oppression. Quaker Oats responded by releasing an official apology after receiving extensive backlash, stating that the logo will be removed in consideration for the consequences of enforcing the idea of Black inferiority (Kesslen 2020). The severity of their reaction perfectly demonstrates how serious racial stereotypes in the media really are. Quaker Oats realized how damaging the effect of their branding's misrepresentation of a minority was, and the ramifications it could have had. Their role in promoting the incorrect portrayal of Black women has served as a subliminal message, encouraging prejudiced ideologies discreetly. These conventional images, however, are not limited to African Americans as they affect all race groups and their perceptions of one another. Furthermore, in today's digital age, our world revolves around the media and we are constantly being influenced by these social aspects from youth. Even in the twenty-first century, these stereotypes pose a threat to a large margin of people. The endless showcasing of oppressive personas in the media leads to increased prejudice against certain races, Americans being uneducated on other people's contrasting cultures, and countless damaging views throughout all aspects of life.

The Ramifications of Black Stereotypes in the Media

To begin, media formulated archetypes and their negative portrayals especially of African Americans have led to the enabling of racism. Stereotypes of the Black community including the Savage, Mammy, and Jezebel may not be as prevalent today, yet their impact is still seen as they continue to create race-related conflicts. These preconceived notions all stem from the same idea that Black people are mediocre compared to other races. For example, the Mammy stereotype describes a Black woman who works for a white family. They are almost considered as part of the family and tend to the children as if they are their own. Appearance-wise, Mammy is described to be masculine, hideous, obese, and therefore not seen as a threat to the family's marriage. The most notable portrayal of Mammy was in the 1939 classic *Gone With the Wind* played by Hattie McDaniel. The movie featured Mammy as a 'content' slave who was opposed to being freed and only wished to stay with her gracious white family. This significantly downplayed the seriousness of slavery and made it an anecdotal idea. The story became a huge hit as both the film and novel made record-breaking sales. The overall success demonstrates how many people's perceptions were shaped by their release (Green 1998). This has left a lasting impact on society as it embedded the idea of Black inferiority when the country was in an impressionable state in history, making sure that it would permeate to modern society. As time progresses, however, African Americans' representation has slightly changed. The Howard Journal of Communications is a multicultural organization that works to publish original information on interracial issues surrounding cultural, gender, and ethnic representation in the media. In 2011, they decided to focus on ten reality television shows and analyze how they chose their cast. The research determined that each show had selected one participant who fell under the new stereotypes of angry black woman, hoochie, hoodrat, and thug. All of which have greatly contributed to the characterization of African Americans as dangerous by placing implications in their Black culture. For instance, many Black communities that are rich in culture are labeled as "ghetto" due to poverty rates in these areas (Tyree 2011). Based on past data, it is evident that higher rates of poverty lead to heightened crime, some of these crimes include gang-related activity (Šileika and Jurgita 2012). While the rest of the community may be unified and cooperative, the media will only focus on gang activity therefore

criminally labeling all inhabitants of the “ghetto”. These “ghettos” are represented negatively in countless films and shows including *The Hate You Give* and *All American*. In both these projects, black communities are seen causing trouble, and characters are displayed as criminals. This is a factor of the generalization of the Black community that creates and fuels stereotypes in the media.

The consequences of Latino Misrepresentation in the Media

Similar to the detrimental stereotypes surrounding Black people, racial profiling of Latin people and their consequences are seen throughout the world. The idea that the Latino population consists of drug dealers, rapists, and gang members has been imprinted on our society in many forms of media (Berg 2002). For instance, *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummings follows a mother and her son on their journey to cross the border in an effort to escape the cartels. However, *American Dirt* did not remain unscathed as it received almost instant backlash from mainly the Latin community. The feedback is not limited to angry readers, many Latin authors gave their input as well. Myriam Gurba, Daniel Peña, and David Bowles argue that Cummins was “lazy” for writing a story lacking in any variety of culture. From the phrases to the events such as a quinceanera, *American dirt* is filled with basic, stereotypical ideas. Many other people think that it was wrong of her to depict Mexico as a “hellhole” and a country where people live in fear rather than one they would like to visit. She is repetitive in the fact that Mexico is a dangerous country and implies that if the most tourist-infested city is violent, then imagine how unsafe the others are (Alter 2020).

The Positive Effects of Asian Stereotypes in the Media

In contrast to the previously negative stereotypes stated, the stereotypes surrounding the Asian community are considered beneficial to them. The idea that the Asian community has a higher intelligence has permeated throughout both academic and professional fields. Not only have these images spread to older generations, but they are often revealed to the youth. For example, in some children’s television shows, the Asian character is predominantly portrayed as being the intelligent and sensible one in the group. There are even some Disney portrayals of this preconception, for instance, in Disney’s *Bunk ’d*, the Chinese character *Tiffany Chen* is portrayed as an extremely academically gifted child who prioritizes her future, in which she plans to attend ivy league schools. The effects of early exposure to Asian stereotypes are translated into the future when they become more likely to get into universities or be hired for a job because they are known to be hardworking and smart. This is further elaborated through the racial breakdown of incoming freshmen in Californian universities in 2015. Statistics show that Asians or Asian-Americans make up the largest margin of the student body with 43.1% at UC Berkeley, 38.4% at UCLA, and 51% at UC San Diego (Khrista Sayo & Elissa Choi 2016). Further proving that stereotypes have contributed to academic success specifically regarding the Asian population.

Conclusion

Assumptions based on television, film, and social sites have shaped the discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of Americans in daily life. The villainization of African Americans has emerged as a result of misrepresentation in the media and has led to increased racism throughout the country. The Latin’s community cliché is constructed to portray them as unwanted immigrants who bring an influx of crime and drugs into the country. The Asian stereotype, however, presumes that they are all academically inclined and opens further opportunities to success than other races. Overall, racism has deep roots in our society, and we all have to work together to uproot them. Fortunately, our society has the power to create positive changes by implementing a new educational system to combat racial prejudices.