

In which ways do  
media  
representations  
construct our  
identities



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There is an ongoing argument between theorists whether media representations influence peoples identities or not.

A majority of theorists believe that all forms of media effects the way people look, behave and even think, whereas others theorists such as ' Homi Bhabha' believe that identities do not even exist at all, that identities are simple used as ' a weapon in a cultural war' (H, Bhabha, 1979. Pg168).

Through using various media examples and theorist opinions I am going to convey why I think that media representations do have an impact on constructing identities. In today's society media is unavoidable and is now part of every day life. On a daily basis people watch television, read newspapers and magazines, listen to the radio and look at and listen to various advertisements.

Although people may not acknowledge it, media does contribute in constructing our identities and this is highly connected to repetition. Due to television programmes and films constantly portraying certain stereotype characters of various groups of people, the public in turn try to reinvent what appears on the screen, as it is being repeated so often that they believe what they see. The film ' American Beauty' (1999, Sam Mendes) is a good example of what lengths people will go to in order to ' fit in'. All three of the protagonist females all conform to or try live up to the typical stereotype image of how a female should look. The mother ' Carolyn' is a slim attractive woman in her early forties who wears lots of make-up and short and tight fitting clothing and ' Angela' who is her daughters friend is a young, slim and attractive girl who continuously wears revealing clothing. The only female character whom does not initially conform to the stereotype female image is <https://assignbuster.com/in-which-ways-do-media-representations-construct-our-identities/>

Carolyn's daughter 'Jane' as she wears no make-up and hides her slim body under baggy clothing, but we then learn that she is saving up for breast augmentation surgery, which she does clearly not need.

This connotes to the audience that all females should be slim and attractive and do their best to look 'perfect', which is not a realistic or positive message to convey. It is not just this particular film that connotes this message, it is something that is constantly and repetitively reinforced through out media mediums. The majority of advertisements and television programmes contain slim and attractive males and females, for example, the main characters in 'Eastenders' (BBC1) are slim and pretty such as Sam, Kate and Sharon and the males appear attractive and often macho like Phil Mitchell and Andy. This results in people trying to reproduce the characters image by purchasing similar clothes as their role models and by pressuring them to be slim. Seeing such representations of people effects our identities, as they are so 'anxiously repeated' (H, Bhabha, 1979. p 66) that what we see on the screen becomes naturalized.

Media representations do not only put pressure on people to look a certain way, they also effect the way we are. Via advertisements, films and television programmes a happy, nuclear family is often positively promoted to us, whereas both of the parents work, the children are in education and in which all family members get on. This may be an ideal family, but its also an impossible one. For example in 'American Beauty' the family is full of unfilled desires, repressed needs and shattered hopes, yet they put on a facade to the outside world as a happy family as a 'commercial for how

normal we are' (Leicester) . This portrays the importance of being ' normal' in order to fit in to society.

In 1938 actor Orson Welles (Citizen Kane) adapted H. G Wells Wars of the worlds for radio, created in the style of a news programme, which was a story about the invasion of earth by Martians. ' Six million people listened to the show and an estimated one million believed it an panicked. ' ( David Philips, 2001, pg 1) This portrays that media can effect our identities by not just moulding our personalities, but by making us do strange things. Media representation has also been linked to the increasing crime rate in the UK Three years ago the director general of the National Crime Intelligence '.

.... criticised the film industry for glamorising violent crime and portraying villains as heroes. ' (C, Beyer, 2002.

Pg 19). This is evidently true in most films, for example in ' Fight Club' (1999, David Fincher) there are numerous fight scenes all of which encourages fighting and portrays it as a positive activity. The protagonist character ' Tyler' is the person who organises the fighting, yet he still gains the most sympathy from the audience. Such storylines which indirectly promote crime, also exists in daily soaps.

For example in ' Eastenders' ' Phil Mitchell' is constantly doing some sort of criminal act, yet he is never punished. This conveys a negative message that you can commit crimes with-out any consequences. As there is so much aggression portrayed within the media, it is hardly surprising that violent crime rates have increased, especially considering that violence has become something we view on a regular basis, hence it's become naturalised. There <https://assignbuster.com/in-which-ways-do-media-representations-construct-our-identities/>

have been some more drastic cases which prove that media representations effect peoples identities. In 1993 a young boy called ' James Bulger' was horrifically murdered by two older boys after they copied a scene from the film ' Child Play 3' (1991, John Lafia). This is a very disturbing scenario which emphasises how much the media can effect peoples behaviour.

It has been proven that ' lots of murderers have watched violent and pornographic films in the weeks leading up to the offence. Other factors had been involved but the films they had watched had influenced their final act. ( C, Beyer, 2002. pg19) . This is a shocking fact that proves that media representations do effect some peoples identities. Media representations also effect the way we view and identify other people.

It appears that only a small majority of people are represented through media. The majority of television programmes and films consist mainly of white people. For example the whole cast of ' American Beauty' are white which is an unrealistic way of portraying America as in reality it has such an ethnic diverse population. This is also true in television programmes like ' Eastenders' whom mainly have a white cast, which again is an untrue way of portraying the location its set in. Although television is highly populated by white people over the recent years other ethnic groups have began to be acknowledged and appear in television and films, yet it appears that when they do finally reach media they are negatively represented, ' Eatenders' is a key example.

In the whole of the cast there are only three black male characters, all of which seem to be stereotyped by their skin colour. One of which is ' Paul'

who is unemployed, in to dodgy deals and who is having an affair with a female who is already in a relationship, the other is his father who runs a bed and breakfast, yet hardly ever seems to have any customers and seems to have no real role except as being a comedy figure and finally 'Gus' who rarely appears in the programme at all and when he does he seems to have a slightly dopey persona. All three of the black actors are represented in a negative light as being useless and troublesome, which is an unfair and misrepresentation of black people. This proves that it is hard for certain identities to gain visibility and when they finally do they are not always taken seriously. The lack of representation of certain identities is also present in other media forms, such as advertisements.

Most television adverts such as 'Carte Dor' (Channel 5) and 'Persil' (ITV) adverts use white people to advertise their products and when other ethnic groups are used in adverts they are usually negatively represented, for example a black lady is used in an 'Herbal Essence' (ITV) advert yet she is seen singing out of tune, hence portraying her as a comedy figure rather than having a serious role. Such lack of and negatively represented people in all media forms effects the identity of both the type of person represented and the people who are outside of the group that view such representations. By continuously misrepresenting certain identities via media on a regular basis some people begin to believe what they see and often expect certain identities to be as bad as they are portrayed, as media is so influential as 'it delivers assumptions that this is the way things are....

.....

. carries a view of the world that is never questioned'. (G, Burton, 1990. pg164).

Hence, people have faith in the media and often believe what the media portray as being true. Representations in newspapers also effect our identities. This is because the people with power have rights over what is published, hence newspapers are ' bias by definition because no communication is neutral or value free. ' (G, Burton, 1990. pg 146) . This conveys that the contents of a newspaper article is simply just someone's interpretation of an event rather than just being factual, for example the same story may be written in several newspapers yet their opinion and message of the story is different depending on which papers it's read in.

Which paper a person reads on a regular basis can effect a persons identity. This is because different people represent different identities differently, for example ' The Sun' is viewed as a racist newspaper who regularly criticises asylum seekers , whereas other newspaper such as ' The Guardian' primarily represent the higher class people by featuring articles that only highly intelligent people would be able to relate to. This conveys that a persons opinion can be affected by the newspaper they read, as a certain set of views are portrayed via the articles in them, which in turn are often reflected onto the readers. According to ' Homi Bhaba' most newspapers misrepresent black people. He believes that the front pages of newspapers contain stories about ' black thugs' (Bhaba, 1979. pg89) and the back pages featuring black sports stars.

This is sometimes true, which when it's done stereotypes black people as being bad people who are only good at sports. Although I believe that media representations do contribute to constructing our identities I think that it depends on the individual on how much they actually let media influence them. Part of everyone's identity is biologically formed and fixed from birth, but identities in general are fluid and partly depends on many factors including when a person was born and the time their living in. For instance someone who lived through world war 2 will probably have a different view on life to someone who was born in 1990 as their life experiences and circumstances are in complete contrast to one another. A persons upbringing and location also effects a persons identity which will effect the way a person will get influenced by media.

A person who lives in mullti cultural society for instance would be able to watch a soap and not believe negative stereotypes of ethic groups that are being portrayed, whereas another person who lives in a white dominated area may do, as the media may be their only way of viewing ethnic groups. The way a person reads media can also relate to the common sense of the time a person is living, for example in the 1950's it was not common sense to be gay, as conveyed in ' American Beauty' by ' Jim and Jim' who were constantly verbally abused because of their sexuality, whereas today its more acceptable. Peoples common sense effects the way they let media construct their identities because it relates to the way they respond to media, for instance some females may take note of all the slim females in media and vigorously diet, whereas others know that you do not need to be super slim and instead just try to be healthy, rather than letting their weight



and image take over their whole life. Through doing research on various media mediums and the way they effect people I think that its clearly evident to say that media representations do not simply reflect identities that they actually construct them.

I think that this is true for all types of media mediums as we are constantly inflicted by them, that they become part of our everyday life. Many people do not like to believe that they are influenced my media, but that is clearly not true as nearly everyone has gone out and brought a product after seeing an advert about how good it is and taken on a certain opinion on a subject after reading someone else's view point of it in a newspaper or a magazine, as you would have often only been told just one side of the story. In conclusion, it is clear that media does highly contribute in constructing a persons identity, as media plays such a vast part in everyone's life that instead of media reflecting society ' we now have a situation where society is reflecting...

... the imaginations of some in the media industry. ' ((C, Beyer, 2002. pg19).

This quote alone emphasises how powerful media has become in constructing one's identity.