

Racial stereotypes in american popular culture and media



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A "stereotype" can be defined simply as; a process for making metal printing plates, or a plate made by this process (the process of a stereotype). Another definition for the word, more commonly used, means a simplified or standardized conception and/or image of a particular group. The old definition of "stereotype" relates to the sociological definition of the word, in that it is a taking from a "mold cast in type metal"(symbolically). I would compare this mold to the way that some people think, i. e. stereotypically.

Many people have ideas "molded" into their minds about certain groups of people, and this is a "mold" of sorts that is ingrained within the human mind, in "type metal" so to say. There are many, many stereotypes perpetuated by different media outlets that highly influence the way that the every day person thinks or feels about particular groups of people. In this paper, I will target specifically racial stereotypes, as well as how those inside and outside of the stereotyped group are affected by the stereotypes.

This paper is also an explanation of how different forms of media influence the masses and perpetuate stereotypes about certain groups of people that either positively or negatively affect these different groups. My main target will be stereotypes of African-Americans, but I will target other minorities in the United States as well. I will expound on historical, as well as modern stereotypes about African-Americans particularly as well as other racial/ethnic groups.

African-American Racial Stereotypes in the Media (historical) One specific brand of stereotyping often promoted by the 'media' that I would like to target in this paper is the 'racial stereotype'. Many different racial groups

are often stereotyped and many actors are also “ type-casted” in movie roles based on their race. Since the inception of television and movies in American popular culture, they have been used as a medium to portray certain images and messages about certain groups of people, particularly minorities, to spread fear and propoganda to the masses.

One shining example of this is how television and magazines were used to depict black people in America during the early 1900’s. There were many different stereotypical caricatures of African-Americans. A few examples of these would be the sambo, mammy, pick ninny, jezebel, and “ black face” caricatures within popular film and television. I would like to expound on each of these caricatures in the following paragraphs. Sambo The “ sambo” caricature is believed to have originated from a children’s book entitled, “ Little Black Sambo”, by Helen Bannerman, published in 1899.

The original illustrations depicted a pitch black-faced Tamil boy with large eyes and wide pink lips. This illustration was then brought alive in film and movies through the “ coon” and or “ sambo” caricature, which is a character of a black man who is giddy, docile, and eager to please his white master. In his book, " Is Bill Cosby Right? : Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind? ", Michael Eric Dyson states, "... the Hausa name Sambo, usually given to the second son of the tribe's family, was twisted in South Carolina to signify a lazy, stupid black male, a negative meaning that survives to this day.

This is very true, because this is a term that originated with Indian tribes, not to mean anything negative. And now, it has been used against black Americans to be insulting and/or degrading. Black Face Blackface is

<https://assignbuster.com/racial-stereotypes-in-american-popular-culture-and-media/>

theatrical makeup that was used in minstrel shows during the mid-1800's. The "black face" character was often a white male with his face painted in black, and his lips painted white, as an exaggeration of what were thought to be "black/African" features. Whites who performed in blackface in film included Bing Crosby, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, and many, many others.

Even Bugs Bunny appeared in blackface as "Southern Fried Rabbit" in 1953. The way this character has been portrayed image-wise seems to have been derived from the illustrations of the children's book, "Little Black Sambo". The "black-face" character was depicted as a "coon", which was a derogatory term for African-Americans. The "coon" character was simpleminded, and unintelligent. The prototypical movie coon was a slow-talking, slow-walking, self-demeaning nitwit. Such movies that portrayed the "coon" character in blackface included "Uncle Tom's Cabin", and "The Birth of a Nation".

The "blackface" and "sambo" characters are brought to life even in the 21st century as many black males are still portrayed in movies and television shows as the "shuck n' jive" giddy character who is simpleminded and/or stupid, always has to tell a joke, or dresses in drag (Martin Lawrence, Tyler Perry, Eddie Murphy, etc). Picaninny The "picanniny" caricature was the dominant racial caricature of black children for most of United States history. They were referred to as "child coons". The first famous pica ninny was "Topsy", a poorly dressed, neglected, slave girl.

She appeared in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel entitled, "Uncle Tom's Cabin". This "pica ninny" character was created to show the evils of

slavery. The picaninny caricature always showed black children as poorly dressed; with ragged, torn, and/or oversized clothes, or even near nude. They were shown with unruly hair, and one popular image of the pica ninny caricature displays a black child with a very wide mouth eating a watermelon. This perpetuated the stereotype of blacks eating watermelon, among other types of foods the slaves would eat which were passed down to their descendents.

Picaninnies were portrayed in greeting cards, on-stage, and in physical objects as insignificant beings. Stories like the “ Ten Little Niggers” show black children being rolled over by boulders, chased by alligators, and set on fire. Black children were also shown on postcards being attacked by dogs, chickens, and other animals. This was consistent with the many 19th and 20th century pseudo-scientific theories that claimed blacks were destined for extinction. The “ mammy” The mammy is the most well known and enduring racial caricature of African-American women.

The “ mammy” caricature portrayed an obese, coarse, maternal figure. She had great love for her white family, was eager to please, and often showed disdain for her own family. This character derived from the presence of female slaves who served as the “ right hand” of plantation mistresses. The mammy caricature was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness. She was portrayed as dark skinned, often pitch black, she was obese, old, and overall unattractive and sexually undesirable.

The attempt was to desexualize the “ mammy” character to deny that white men found black women sexually desirable to justify their place in the home

as “mammy”; which history shows this not to be the case, as black women were very often exploited and abused/raped by white men. Such examples of the “mammy” caricature coming to life include films like “The Birth of a Nation”, in which the mammy defends her white master’s home against both black and white Union soldiers. The message here was that the mammy would rather fight for her master than to be free. The mammy character was always loyal to her white master.

This caricature perpetuated a stereotype about black female servants; that they would do anything to defend their slave master and his family. The “mammy” character is still alive even in the 21st century, and is often perpetuated now by black males dressing in drag...such as in the films of actors/comedians like Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, and Tyler Perry. Tyler Perry for example is controversial in that he perpetuates a stereotypical “mammy-like” caricature; Tyler Perry is always dressed as a large/overweight, overbearing, loud, unruly-haired, asexual, unattractive black woman.

This is very similar to the original mammy character that was portrayed during the early 1900’s. Jezebel The stereotype/archetype of the “jezebel” was a popular portrayal of black women as lascivious by nature. Words descriptive of this stereotype include: alluring, seductive, worldly, tempting, and lewd. In the “jezebel” archetype, black women were portrayed in movies and on television as sexual creatures who had no self respect and no self control. Movies such as “Coffy”(1973), “Foxy Brown”(1974), and “The Big Bird Cage”(1972) have roles where black women are portrayed in this “jezebel” stereotype.

The jezebel was basically the “black whore”. Other African-American Stereotypes in the Media (modern) African-American Men There are a few, more “modern” stereotypes that have to do with African-Americans. For example, the stereotype often perpetuated by television and movies of black males being violent, criminal, and aggressive. In many movies, television shows, and even on news broadcasts, black males are portrayed as loud, aggressive, rude, and criminal. Many times, even more so 20 years ago, stories where black men were the aggressor and/or the criminal were broadcasted on news stations everywhere in an attempt to spread propaganda.

These stories were intentionally broadcasted as opposed to stories where white men were the aggressors because it was more “sensational”. Many news stations and other forms of news media focus on what is sensational, as opposed to just delivering the news. This stereotype has also been perpetuated in film and television. The black man as criminal appears frequently in popular culture and media. The stereotype is often used to justify racial profiling in the United States. A few examples of this include media coverage on the news of criminal/court trials involving black men.

Often, the public automatically sees the black male as being guilty, even if he is found innocent, as seen in the cases of (for example) Michael Jackson, and O. J. Simpson. In movies and television, anything “big and black” is often portrayed in a negative/scary light...even someone who is wearing all black is seen as “scary”. This is a sub conscious stereotype that penetrates the minds of the masses that translates into associating “black skin” with

something that is “ scary” or “ bad”. African-American Women There are also many stereotypes associated with black women in the media.

One such stereotype suggests that black women are always angry, loud, overbearing, and bossy. A great example of this that comes to mind was the villain named “ Omarosa” from Donald Trump’s “ The Apprentice”, season 1. Many times, in “ reality television”, there is one (or more) black female character(s) that is chosen by casting directors to be the one with the “ attitude” of the group. Many times the producers of the shows encourage certain cast members to behave in certain ways for the “ sensational” aspect of it...the fact that they will garner more views for their show, and more people will talk about their show.

Omarosa from season 1 of “ The Apprentice”, for example was portrayed in a very negative light. She was snooty, stuck up, and overall was portrayed as having a very bad attitude. This is very often how black females are portrayed on television shows and in movies. One movie that came out recently entitled, “ Precious” garnered a lot of attention and stirred up some controversy among many, particularly African-American women. This movie was seen by many as a very negative and stereotypical portrayal of urban African-American women.

Some people argue that the movie “ Precious” stereotypes overweight black women...or that it stereotypes the majority of urban black women as being overweight, uneducated, young unwed mothers who suffer from abusive, broken homes. The movie “ Precious” is just another example of how stereotypes about certain groups of people can be exploited for monetary

gain by directors and producers of movies, and television shows. Other Minorities in American Media Mexican-Americans In the current political climate, there is a lot of talk about immigration law, and most of the focus seems to be on those of Mexican origin.

Most people who protest against “ illegal immigration”, do not talk about illegal immigrants from the north, or even the far east. Most of the focus is on Mexican “ illegal aliens” exclusively. In my opinion, this targeting of undocumented Mexicans residing in America is quite racist. Many people have even fabricated erroneous statements about Mexican Americans to justify their own hatred; for example, Arizona governor Jan Brewer told fox news in an interview that Mexicans were crossing the boarder and beheading innocent people.

She has done nothing but spread propaganda about Mexican-Americans, and Mexican illegal immigrants, in order to further her own agenda. Those of Mexican origin who are here legally in this country have to suffer because of such propaganda spread about others who happen to look like them. This is what often happens to minority groups in America. The group is stereotyped by the majority, and the rest of them must suffer because of this stereotype. These stereotypes are greatly promoted by television, movie, and news outlets...they are very powerful tools of mind control to the masses.

Muslim-Americans Especially since September 11th, 2001, Arab-Americans, and practicing Muslims have been under a lot of scrutiny, thanks to media propaganda by certain news outlets, namely FOX news, which seems to be less of a news channel and more of a propaganda and gossip tool. Muslim

and Arab-Americans have been the victims of some unrelenting slandering by different news castors, newspapers, and other media outlets. Muslims and those of Arab/Middle-Eastern descent were slandered as being violent, extremist, terrorists who were anti-American and wanted to harm all non-Muslims.

This resulted in many hate crimes around the country against Muslims. This is yet another example of how television and movies are very powerful tools that influence people and the way that they think of, or stereotype certain groups of people. White Americans in American Media White, or European-Americans are the majority in the United States, population-wise. Some would suggest that because of this, they may have historically and currently had more control over mass media (television, radio, movies, etc.). This could explain some of the historical pigeon-holing and stereotyping of certain minority groups.

Some prejudiced/racist white-Americans would use media outlets to spread fear and hatred about minorities, and especially African-Americans during the early 1900's and through most of the remaining 20th century.

Seemingly, white Americans are not stereotyped as often as other groups, but they are stereotyped in the media as well. For instance, blonde white women are portrayed often as being ditsy and unintelligent. One recent and shining example of this was the incredible amount of attention on Miss 'South Carolina', Teen USA 2007, or a young lady named Caitlin Upton.

She became an instant viral superstar with her embarrassing answer to a question about geographical education in American classrooms. Some would

say that she portrayed blonde white women in a negative light, because she was unintelligent, fumbling over her words, and repeating statements such as, “ like, such as, in places like the Iraq and other places such as...”. On the other hand, blonde white women are also portrayed as being very beautiful, and in fact the most beautiful type of woman that there is. The thin, busty blue-eyed blonde seems to be the “ all American” ideal of beauty.

This is something that is often promoted by different media outlets (television, movies, magazines...). Even though there are negative stereotypes about blonde white women, the fact that they are seen as the most beautiful and/or attractive type of woman in this country is to their advantage. White men were even portrayed in a negative light in the media and news outlets during a time when there were many mass-shootings and serial killings happening in the country. Most of them were white males, and this could have had a negative effect on white males.

Some people stereotype serial killers as being crazed white men in a basement or in the forest somewhere building bombs and getting ammo to go and murder innocent people. Common sense would tell us though, that not all serial killers/domestic terrorists are white. This has become very apparent in the public eye since the Virginia Tech shootings, which, as revealed by the media, a young Asian-American male was the culprit for such a violent act. White American males on the other hand, have the positive stereotype of being successful, wealthy, and powerful, which is often how they are portrayed in the media.

This also reflects on reality in some sense, as most CEOs of companies, and the majority of people successful in other fields in a white-majority society are indeed white-Americans. Stereotypes, whether negative or positive about any group, do have some basis in reality. Conclusion Many different groups are stereotyped in different forms of mass media...many other groups that I have not covered in this short essay. Movies and television have promoted certain stereotypes (whether good or bad) about certain groups of people that have affected them greatly (either negatively or positively).

Stereotypes are not always necessarily bad or negative, even though the negative stereotypes are what have been focused on the most in mass media, and what has also been reflected on in this essay. As stated previously, stereotypes, whether positive or negative, have some basis in reality. They are an exaggeration of reality, and a defense mechanism that people use to stay away from what they actually know nothing about, and are fearful of. Hopefully, after reading this essay, what can be understood is that mass media has been used as a very powerful tool to influence how the public thinks about certain people and certain groups of people.

Bibliography

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_African_Americans

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>

<https://assignbuster.com/racial-stereotypes-in-american-popular-culture-and-media/>