

The Effects of Media on African Americans: Self-Identity and Stereotypes
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Introduction

The media remains a powerful presence in US Culture. It gives people news of world and local events, it entertains, and it may even function as a companion to children. Because it functions as a window to the outside world, the potential for distorting one's view is high. By portraying a world in which people's opinions are based on their ethnic or demographic group membership the media may also subtly but powerfully create the very opinions they seek to reflect.¹ As argued decades ago, stereotypes are necessary for efficient communication between humans because to attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalizations, is exhausting,² but have those stereotypes become hindering and unrealistic?

There are an abundant amount of studies that place emphasis on the effects news media has on reinforcing racial stereotypes. Although dated, much of the literature suggests reinforced stereotypes are a result of the overrepresentation and misrepresentation of African Americans in the media. The most reported stereotypes in news media depict issues dealing with poverty and crime. Other media formats have also been reported to stereotype black beauty and intelligence with negative connotation. These stereotypes have been found to not only have an impact on the African American identity, but the perceptions people of other races have of African Americans as well.

Within the literature review effects of news media and social media on African Americans in terms of constructing self-identity and the concept of reinforced stereotypes is addressed. Two studies spurred an interest in the area and posit two notions that set the tone for the literature review to follow:

- A. Crime is central to the public debate about the state of American society. Citizens consistently express great concern about the issue and are increasingly calling for punitive policies, such as "three strikes" and the death penalty. In response, politicians and policymakers have allocated larger and larger shares of their budgets to crime control. This is ironic given that the population-adjusted crime rate has declined in recent years. This article addresses the paradox by focusing on the role of television news. A content analysis of local television news in a major media market demonstrates that coverage of crime features two important cues: Crime is violent,

¹ Anastasio, Phyllis, Karen Rose, and Judith Chapman . "Can the Media Create Public Opinion?: A Social-Identity Approach." *Psychological Science* . no. 8 (1999): 152-155.

² Lipman, W. *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1922.

and criminals are nonwhite. We translate these media biases into an experimental design that manipulates the level of violence and the race of the perpetrator to test the relevance of these cues to public thinking about crime.³

- B. A random survey of nonstudent adult residents was undertaken to determine whether exposure to network news has a demonstrable effect on racial attitudes and perceptions of African Americans. After controlling for a number of factors, results revealed that exposure to network news depressed estimates of African American income. In addition, network news exposure increased the endorsement of African American stereotypes, particularly the view that African Americans were poor and intimidating, and was positively associated with higher racism scores.⁴

In a study done to address the public perceptions of race and crime and the role racial stereotypes play in formulating these perceptions, statistics indicated how perception and stereotypes might correlate.⁵ During 1990, the time of this study, African Americans made up between 12-13 percent of America's population (we now know according the Census Bureau, that number is closer to 14 percent) but accounted for more than half of all arrests for robbery and murder, and just under half of all inmates in state and federal correctional facilities. This can be an indicator as to why individuals connect criminal activity with race and their views of crime are likely to be based in some part, to their judgment of Blacks.⁶

³ Franklin D. Gilliam. "Crime in Black and White." *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1996: 6-23

⁴ Dixon, Travis L. "Network News and Racial Beliefs: Exploring the Connection Between National Television News Exposure and Stereotypical Perceptions of African Americans." *Journal of Communication*, 2008: 321-337.

⁵ Hurwitz, J., and M. Peffley. "Public Perceptions of Race and Crime: The Role of Racial Stereotypes." *American Journal of Political Science*. no. 41 (1997): 375-401.

⁶ Ibid

Although it is not solely responsible, mass media plays a critical role in the exaggeration of stereotypes.⁷ Not only have studies of local news broadcasts found that violent crimes committed by Blacks comprised a substantial amount of news coverage, but they also reveal that Blacks were portrayed as more physically threatening. Much of the findings on media and racial stereotypes suggest that media is a contributing factor rendering stereotypes of Blacks as more negative.

Theoretical Framework

When approaching this topic the concepts and themes of social-identity theory should be kept in mind. An individual who is a minority may perceive that his or her identity is being threatened and will have an increased awareness of the characteristics of his or her own demographically dissimilar group. In an attempt to understand and address this issue Social Identity theory will serve as the guiding theoretical framework. Social identity theory can predict when people categorize themselves and others as belonging to different groups; they inevitably assign preferences to the group they perceive to be like them.⁸

Psychology in Organizations- The Social Identity Approach by Alexander Haslam, (2001) best summarizes the history and core assumptions of social identity theory:

Social Identity Theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. The theory was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination.⁹ They attempted to identify the minimal conditions that would lead members of one group to discriminate in favor of the ingroup to which they belonged and against another outgroup. In the Social Identity Theory, a person has not one, "personal self", but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social

⁷ Entman, R. "Blacks in the News: Television, Modern Racism, and Cultural Change." *Journalism Quarterly*. no. 2 (1992): 341-361.

⁸ DiTomaso, N., Post, C., & Parks-Yancy, R. "Workforce diversity and inequality: Power, status, and numbers." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33(1), (2007): 473-501.

⁹ Tajfel, H., and J. Turner. *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979.

contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on basis of his personal, family or national “level of self.” Apart from the “level of self”, an individual has multiple “social identities”. Social identity is the individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups. In other words, it is an individual-based perception of what defines the “us” associated with any internalized group membership. This can be distinguished from the notion of personal identity which refers to self-knowledge that derives from the individual’s unique attributes.¹⁰

As per Hogg and Abrams (1988) social identity theory provides both a cognitive and motivational perspective on the origins and consequences of group identification.¹¹ Identification with a group involves membership and the collective interests of the group, because one of the key motivating factors in social-identity theory categorization is the bolstering and maintenance of self-esteem.¹²

An assumption of social-identity theory is that out-group members are more likely to face stereotyping. It is expected that in turn minority members have to put in more effort to become a respected member of society and they will more likely try to identify with the majority in hopes of receiving a positive social self.¹³

Apart from social-identity theory, another scholarly definition of identity has been adopted for this study as well:

As sub-units of the self-concept, identities are “meanings a person attributes to the self as an object in a social situation or social role.”¹⁴ Structurally, being black in American society means occupying a racially defined status; associated with this status are roles in

¹⁰ Haslam, A.S. (2001). *Psychology in Organizations - The Social Identity Approach*, Sage Publications Ltd, London. Chapter 2: The Social Identity Approach, pp. 26-57.

¹¹ Hogg, M., & Abrams, D. (1988). *Social identification*. London: Routledge.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Rupert, J., Jehn, K.A., van Engen, M.L., & de Reuver R.S.M. (2009). Commitment of cultural minorities in organizations: Effects of leadership and pressure to conform. *Journal of Business Psychology*, 25, 25-37.

¹⁴ Ibid

family, community, and society. One psychological consequence of being black is black group identity, the intensity of which should vary with the nature of role experiences.¹⁵

Crime and Poverty in News

A growing body of research has examined the content and effects of racial stereotypes on U.S. television news programming. Many of these studies have dedicated to investigations of race and crime imagery featured on local news programs.¹⁶

Prior content has revealed that Blacks are linked with criminality more often than are Whites, and that Whites are linked to victimization more often than Blacks.¹⁷ In a study done by Dixon and Linz, 37 percent of blacks were found to be overrepresented as criminal perpetrators on local television news stations in Los Angeles. According to official crime reports during that time African Americans actually comprised 21 percent. Concurrently, studies provide evidence, in which Whites are portrayed more often as the victims of crime, which has more of a positive connotation when assessing one's role or involvement in a crime. Dixon and Linz found Whites represented approximately 43 percent of homicide victims featured in crime news, but were only 13 percent of the homicide victims according to actual crime reports.¹⁸

The issues surrounding poverty is much like what is seen with stereotypical perceptions of crime and false victimization in the news. Gilens examined the discrepancies between the media-portrayals and the actual racial makeup of America's poor. Media portrayals suggest that 62 percent of African Americans make up the American poor. This percentage is alarming because it is more than double the actual population of Blacks in the United States, which

¹⁵ Ibid, 364

¹⁶ Dixon, Travis, and Daniel Linz. "Race and Misrepresentation of Victimization on Local Television News." *Communication Research* . no. 5 (2000): 547-573.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Dixon, Travis, and Daniel Linz. "Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as Lawbreakers on Television News." *Journal of Communication*. no. 2 (2000): 131-154.

according to the 2011 Census Bureau is 14.1 percent. The actual amount of Blacks in poverty is more around 29 percent.¹⁹

The public's exaggerated association of race and poverty not only reflects and perpetuates negative racial stereotypes, but it also increases white American's opposition to welfare. Whites who think the poor are most likely black are more likely to blame welfare recipients for their situation and less likely to support welfare than are those with more accurate perceptions of poverty.²⁰

Online News

Understanding how news and print media can impact the misshapen identity of African Americans and the perceptions other people may have of them, it becomes intriguing and most certainly important to consider another context in which these media misrepresentations are present.

The consumption of online news is becoming increasingly social and interactive, and now commonly includes facilities for sharing and commenting directly on news articles or via social network channels like Facebook or Twitter.²¹ Compared to older forms of media, the internet adds an interactive, discursive dimension to exterior renditions of Black identity and thus enabling interior perspectives on Black identity to become part of the conversation.²² The internet serves as two structures through which racial identity is represented; one being a social structure in which each incident is articulated and responded to, and the other being a discursive structure spanning space and time but constrained by bandwidth and text.

¹⁹ Gilens, Martin. "Race and Poverty in America." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. (1996): 515-541.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Diakopoulos, Nicholas, and Mor Naaman. "Towards Quality Discourse in Online News

Comments." *Proceedings of the ACM 2011 conference on Computer supported cooperative work*. (2011): 133-142. 10.1145/1958824.1958844.

²² Brock, Andre. "'Who do you think you are?': Race Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces." *Writing Public Culture*. 6, (1), (2009): 15-35.

Internet structures are provided in various forms such as online blogs and news, and have been defined as third spaces. As defined by Oldenburg (1991), third spaces have the following features:

- They operate as a neutral space where conversation is the main activity
- They are free of external social hierarchies
- They are inclusive and accessible
- They expand possibilities for association by like-minded souls
- They offer psychological comfort and spiritual support²³

These third spaces allow for public discussion among and about Black people that was once limited to certain arenas. A recent Pew survey found that 37 percent of online news users think that commenting on news stories is an important feature to have, and that 25 percent of users have contributed their comments to online news articles.²⁴ In the context of blogging we see an increase in the amount of actual bloggers. Because web users prefer the use of blogs, they are permeating most niches of social life, addressing a range of topics from scholarly to political issues, to family and children's daily lives. With such a wide range in topics, writers are becoming more prolific.²⁵

What we learn from third-spaces that couldn't be derived from traditional media is that Blacks now have the opportunity to reflect on the media representations of themselves and disprove the stereotypical idea of a homogenous black community. Brock's study exemplifies how Black people could approach a topic from diverse perspectives centered around a common cultural viewpoint.²⁶

It is also important to note that using internet mediums makes the discussion on the construct of black identity available to all people. This in contrast to the first point that Blacks can give claim to how they identify themselves also allows for expression of how members belonging to other communities perceive the black identity. Some websites are cognizant of this, therefore monitoring what is put up for discussions and how they go about telling a story, i.e. use of metaphors, while other sites don't limit what they publish. Some cites are used to spark conversation about "real" topics which may embrace the use of seemingly harsh or offensive language, whereas other cites may use blogs and mass communicating as a source to come

²³ Oldenburg, Raymond. *The Great Good Place*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 1991.

²⁴ Ibid, 38

²⁵ Viegas, Fernanda. "Bloggers Expectations of Privacy and Accountability: An Initial Survey." *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*. no. 3 (2005).
<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue3/viegas.html>.

²⁶ Ibid

together and share both struggles and accomplishments much like what we see from The National Association of Black Journalists.

Considering the openness of online media commenting, early work in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) posits some considerable variables:

CMC has documented how a lack of status cues and social context can introduce unwelcome, low-quality contributions into online communication systems. Quality in this context refers to a degree of excellence in communicating knowledge or intelligence and normatively includes notions of accuracy, reliability, validity, currency, relevancy, comprehensiveness, and clarity. In the realm of online comments low-quality contributions might include “flaming” and more impulsive remarks and are often implicated with anonymity, with less anonymity linked to higher quality comments.²⁷

The uses and gratifications of online news commenting have been tested as well and its framework helps describe how and why active media consumers engage media in order to satisfy specific needs. It has been found to offer a high-level typology of gratifications that people typically seek from media, including information, *personal identity*, integration, social interaction, and entertainment.²⁸

Discussion/Conclusion

From the literature review I have concluded that no matter what type of media format one utilizes they are still subject to receive overused and rather negative portrayals of African Americans in news. Studies on racial stereotypes existing through various news media formats seem to be replicated time and time again. Similar findings can confirm the accuracy of data, but also suggests that the subject has been exhausted and limits the variety of knowledge on the subject. Although more timely research tends to generalize the concept of social media and its role in identity formation, assumptions can be made and should be tested in further research to see the direct effects social media has on the identity of African Americans.

When considering the perceptions of African Americans as held by European Americans it would be interesting to see how blogging impacts their perception. In order to assess this, a comparison study can be done. I would suggest European Americans view a news story pertaining to African Americans and reflect on how they view the person depicted. Then the same participants should have to read a blog containing African Americans’ responses to the same event depicted in the news story. After reading and interpreting how blacks feel, the European American participants will have to reflect on their perception of Africans Americans once more. A comparison can be made between the two types of responses and we can try to assess if blogs are actually clearing up racial stereotypes or further condoning them.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

Overall, research in this area is limited and largely outdated. With so many avenues for online news media, new statistics need to be formulated addressing the representation of negative depictions of Blacks in comparison to what we have already learned from traditional news. My hypothesis is that there will still be a misleading overrepresentation of African Americans portrayed negatively in online news media, because traditional news tends to provide an online component as well. The biggest difference lies within the blogs, as mentioned in the literature review. Do African Americans feel like that can reclaim a positive identity and social-self through the use of blogs? I would assume that the responses would not be homogeneous.

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