

Media Effects

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Chapter 16

Media Stereotypes

Content, Effects, and Theory

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Content, Effects, and Theory

Travis L. Dixon

The effects of media stereotyping on both individuals and society has been a topic pursued by media scholars for decades. However, this area of inquiry often struggled to address widespread skepticism and a “step-child-like” attitude from both the media industry and its observers. Those skeptical of the area resisted viewing media as forming a significant part of the landscape influencing our personal, social, and political interactions. To address these critics, media stereotype scholars conducted numerous content analyses to provide strong evidence that the media regularly stereotype women and people of color. However, fewer studies addressed the effects of these images or advanced theory designed to explain the impact of such portrayals on audience members.

Since the last edition of this book, three new and significant factors require our attention. First, the U.S. elected a president who utilizes media stereotypes, particularly against Latinos, Muslims, and African Americans, as political mobilization tools (Gray, 2017; Parker & Costa, 2017; Vitali, Hunt, & Thorp, 2018). His successful utilization of media stereotypes remains a testament to their ability to influence both political and social interaction.

Second, scholars now devote significant time and resources to tease out media stereotype effects and advance theoretical constructs designed to further understand their influence on human behavior (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016; Dixon, 2017c). Scholars’ recognition of mediated stereotyping’s power has grown. Most early scholars took pains to identify how various depictions were commonplace within media. Now, many researchers work to understand the extent to which such depictions shape cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes, using theory to drive these investigations. The attention to effects studies and theorization reflects a maturing of this area of inquiry.

Third, the number of scholars studying media stereotyping effects grew substantially. This growth’s ramifications extend to the heart of media effects and intersect with many areas of study within communication including interpersonal relationships, intergroup relations, and new media (Abrams & Giles, 2007; Harwood & Giles, 2005). Moreover, the blossoming availability of digital media offerings present a fertile frontier for further investigation.

Therefore, this chapter devotes substantial time to stereotyped media content along with an increased focus on how the media influence perceptions of both Whites and people of color.

Below, I provide some key content findings regarding media portrayals of five commonly stereotyped groups: African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and women. Following this, the chapter outlines three key theoretical perspectives utilized by media stereotype scholars to understand the impact of media stereotypes. In order to illustrate each perspective's utility, I review specific effects studies that apply each theoretical approach. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how emerging media on various digital platforms may either enhance or weaken mediated stereotypes' influence.

Content Representations and Prominent Media Stereotypes

To understand media stereotyping's potential effects, one must first determine the extent of their prominence within the media environment. Media effects scholars investigating stereotyping often begin their research by trying to understand a particular group's depiction. Prior investigations have revealed a significant amount of information regarding three groups: women, African Americans, and Latinos. Unfortunately, scholars undertook fewer studies of Asian American and Native American depictions. Below, I describe the unique revelations illuminated by this research.

Gender Portrayals

In this section, I discuss the numerical representation of women, followed by the extent to which gender stereotypes proliferate in the media. Given the intersections between gender and race, later in this chapter I discuss gender differences relevant to African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American identities.

Content analyses consistently found significantly more male than female characters depicted in primetime television (Sink & Mastro, 2017). Women remain underrepresented in comparison to their census population numbers (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). Men dominate film appearances even more, with the vast majority of characters and voice overs in G-rated films produced by males (Smith, Pieper, Granados, & Choueiti, 2010).

In terms of gender stereotypes, primetime and film depictions tend to overrepresent women as homemakers (Sink & Mastro, 2017; Smith et al., 2010). In addition, women tend to be portrayed as more attractive, thinner, and younger than men. Women also behave in a more sexually provocative manner compared to men on television. In fact, the sexual subordination and objectification of women remain the most consistent research findings media scholars investigating gender stereotypes report (Dillman Carpentier & Stevens, 2018; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016).

The objectification and subordination of women appears consistently in music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Karsay, Matthes, Platzer, & Plinke, 2018). Music video content analyses reveal that women are more likely than men to display body parts, be more sexualized, dress more provocatively, engage in sexualized dance, and be sexually objectified (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Turner, 2011).

African American Representations

Generally, media researchers focus a tremendous amount of attention on depictions of African Americans in the media. The binary thinking that drives discussions of race in the U.S. (e.g.,

Black versus White) may explain why African American depictions receive so much attention (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). That said, research on African American portrayals continues to be the most extensive in the media stereotyping literature.

African American Entertainment Television Portrayals

Multiple studies confirm that entertainment media contain numerous and proportional African American representations, especially of Black professionals (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Signor-elli, 2009; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Multiple studies found that African Americans tend to fall somewhere between 13% and 17% of the major characters featured in entertainment television, including as major primetime characters. However, the actual number of Black characters appearing fluctuates quite a bit, and many scholars speculate that this may be tied to the popularity of situation comedies. Television producers tend to relegate African Americans to situation comedies, including entire television shows dominated by African American casts. In turn, their portrayal in both dramas and reality programming tends to occur less frequently. When African Americans do appear on dramas and reality shows, they tend to be depicted in smaller numbers as part of diverse casts, rather than majority Black casts. The entire television landscape has seen situation comedies dip and reality programs increase. As the number of situation comedies has declined, so has the number of African American characters.

Entertainment television tends to be a mixed bag in terms of the quality of portrayals for African Americans. On the one hand, many Black characters in entertainment often appear as good rather than bad characters. Moreover, many Black characters hold high social positions, though this trended downward in recent years (Tukachinsky et al., 2015). On the other hand, African Americans still tend to appear immoral and more despicable compared to White characters (Monk-Turner, Heiserman, Johnson, Cotton, & Jackson, 2010). This portrayal often pervades sports depictions. Sports news and commentary frequently depicts Blacks as unintelligent or dumb, yet naturally talented athletes (Angelini, Billings, MacArthur, Bissell, & Smith, 2014; Primm, DuBois, & Regoli, 2007; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). However, these same sports outlets portray White athletes as intelligent while lacking in athleticism.

Advertising Images of African Americans

A number of studies also considered the African American depictions in advertising. Advertising offers assorted images, with increasingly diverse representations, particularly of Black women in fashion magazines (Baker, 2005; Covert & Dixon, 2008). However, many African American women tend to exhibit Eurocentric rather than Afrocentric features when they appear in ads targeted at both Black and mainstream audiences (Baker, 2005). Meanwhile Black men tend to assume either unemployed or athletic roles (Bailey, 2006).

Music Depictions of African Americans

An increasing number of scholars have devoted their attention to stereotyped music video effects. Much of this work focuses on the rap and R&B (rhythm and blues) genres of music. This research finds that African Americans dominate as both performers and background dancers. The music also features a variety of themes, some of which reinforce stereotypes. For

instance, materialism and sexual objectification emerge as common themes in hip hop music videos (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009). Music videos often sexualize Black women as the “Black jezebel” stereotype (e.g., attitudinal and sexually promiscuous Black woman), presenting them as thin and light-skinned (Conrad et al., 2009; Turner, 2011; Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010). Black female artists are more likely than White female artists to wear provocative clothing and exhibit qualities of sexualized objectification (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). Conversely, music videos present Black men as “dark-skinned aggressive thugs,” especially within rap videos (Conrad et al., 2009).

News Depictions of African Americans

Unlike entertainment, news often negatively portrays African Americans. Although not in all circumstances (e.g., not all news genres), the news often associates Black people with criminal behavior. News programs overrepresent African Americans as criminals compared to crime statistics and underrepresent them in more sympathetic roles such as crime victims (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). When exclusively considering family depictions, Black family members appear to be overrepresented as criminal suspects when compared to both crime reports and compared to White family members (Dixon, 2017a). News and news opinion media also overrepresent African Americans as welfare recipients, especially during times of financial stability (Gilens, 1999; van Doorn, 2015). Finally, news tends to emphasize Black athletes’ criminal activity more strongly than White athletes’, resulting in less sympathetic coverage of Black athletes (Mastro, Blecha, & Atwell Seate, 2011).

Latino Representations

Latino representations differ in some important ways from African American portrayals. The most troubling and consistent finding across numerous studies includes their underrepresentation in comparison to their presence in the population. This underrepresentation can be found across numerous genres and roles, including primetime television (Signorielli, 2009), advertising (Brooks, Bichard, & Craig, 2016), hospital dramas (Hetsroni, 2009), and even gay male blogs (Grimm & Schwartz, 2017).

Latino Entertainment Television Representation

Unlike African Americans, Latinos remain severely underrepresented within commercial English-language television outlets. For example, Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found the percentage of Latino characters was less than 1% in the 1980s and then increased to more than 3% by the 2000s. However, these numbers fall significantly below the 18% of Latino people who live in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Similarly, Signorielli (2009) found that the proportion of Latinos in the U.S. census and the percentage of Latino characters on primetime TV differed by almost 10%. Moreover, Latinos only represent about 1% of models found in mainstream magazines (Seelig, 2007).

Besides being underrepresented, Latinos tend to be portrayed in several stereotypical manners in entertainment media. For example, Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found that many Latino characters were hypersexualized in primetime television and occupied low professional status roles. This occurred more often with Latina females than Latino males. Moreover, Spanish

language television reinforced “the harlot” stereotype, depicting rich Latina women who were sexualized, provocatively dressed, and sporting slim body types (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Ortiz, 2008). In addition, these programs depicted dark-complexion men as aggressive (e.g., “the criminal” stereotype), while portraying men with a fair complexion as intelligent and articulate.

Latinos in the News

The underrepresentation of Latinos continues within the news context, especially when we consider sympathetic roles (Sorenson, Manz, & Berk, 1998). For example, early studies by Dixon and Linz (2000a, 2000b) uncovered Latino underrepresentation as police officers, victims, and perpetrators. A replication of this study found Latinos to be correctly represented as perpetrators, although still underrepresented as officers and victims (Dixon, 2017b).

The issue of immigration and Latino immigrants as criminal or cultural threats manifests as the most recurring stereotype for Latinos in the context of news (Rendon & Johnson, 2015). For example, Chavez, Whiteford, and Hoewe (2010) found that the majority of news stories regarding Mexican immigration from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* featured illegal immigration, with crime being the greatest aspect of these stories. Moreover, the news media, especially English-language outlets, concentrate on immigration in a negative light, focusing on crime and job competition (Branton & Dunaway, 2008; Dunaway, Goidel, Krizinger, & Wilkinson, 2011; Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011). Similarly, Dixon and Williams (2015) found that news reporters identified immigrant criminals as overwhelmingly (and falsely) Latino. In addition, the news depicted virtually every illegal or undocumented immigrant as Latino, which significantly distorts social reality.

Asian Americans

Unfortunately, much of the work on Asian portrayals points to their extreme underrepresentation in the media (Graves, 1999; Grimm & Schwartz, 2017; Mastro, 2009; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Media stereotype representation models put them squarely in a non-recognition stage, in which their appearance occurs so infrequently (less than 3% and often 1% or lower), their presence barely registers within a formal content study (Clark, 1973). For instance, Asians remain severely underrepresented in mainstream magazines and in various genres of television including crime dramas (Schug, Alt, Lu, Gosin, & Fay, 2017).

A few prior studies uncovered evidence that media frequently stereotype Asian Americans as “model minorities.” Primarily, they represent Asian American males as techno-nerds or geeks. For instance, on video games ads and covers, Asian models often interact with new technology (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011). Meanwhile, sports news reinforces this stereotype by depicting Asian athletes as lacking composure (Angelini et al., 2014).

Native Americans

When compared to Asian Americans, researchers uncovered even fewer media representations of Native Americans. Content analyses commonly register fewer than 1% of onscreen characters as Native American, who tend to be relegated to “historical” depictions, such as plains Indians who fought cowboys (Heider, 2000; Lipsitz, 1998; Mastro, 2009). More recent 21st-century

media depictions replaced Native American “savage” imagery, commonly depicted in mid-20th century Westerns, with images of alcoholism and untrustworthy Native casino owners (Harris, 2013; Strong, 2004). Many Native American images in news focus on their cultural festivals, reinforcing the notion that this group is “mysterious” and overly spiritual (Heider, 2000). At the same time, numerous U.S. team mascots employ the savage Native American Warrior trope (Strong, 2004).

Theories and Effects of Mediated Stereotypes

Despite the problematic depictions described above, our understanding of media stereotyping effects increased significantly in the last two decades. This section describes the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects that result from exposure to mediated stereotypes, focusing on relevant theory to drive the discussion. These theories primarily focus on the extent to which mediated stereotypes reinforce White audience members’ negative perceptions of people of color. I describe three primary theoretical perspectives that drive these studies including: priming/cognitive accessibility, cultivation, and social identity theory/social categorization. Following an introduction to these theories and their effects in reinforcing stereotypes, I offer a discussion of how people of color might be influenced by self-consumption of stereotypes related to their own group. I conclude by providing an overview on how media might successfully reduce stereotyping.

Priming, Short-Term Effects, and Cognitive Accessibility

Priming and cognitive accessibility theories argue that media consumption creates mental shortcuts utilized in making relevant judgments about various issues and social groups (Shrum & O’Guinn, 1993; Shrum, Wyer, & O’Guinn, 1998; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). Social psychologists have for some time demonstrated that our minds rely on various cognitive associations that lead to quick judgments about various social categories (i.e., heuristic processing; Slater, 2007; Wicks, 1992). In this sense, heuristic processing enhances social functionality, because it would be cognitively taxing to make individual choices in each social instance (e.g., meeting a person for the first time).

However, heuristic processing also leads to reductionist stereotypical judgments that can be strengthened by media consumption. Numerous scholars demonstrated that a single exposure to a mediated stereotype can activate the cognitive linkage between a particular social group and a stereotypical trait (Dixon, 2007; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996). When activated through a media prime, the link may then inform subsequent (and typically immediate) cognitive, attitudinal, or behavioral decisions. Much of the early experimental research in the media stereotyping domain relied on the priming/accessibility paradigm to investigate effects (Ford, 1997; Valentino, 1999).

In several cases, studies relying on priming and accessibility revealed disturbing findings regarding the reinforcement of media stereotypes about people of color by White audience members. For instance, exposure to “the Black criminal” stereotype leads (mostly White audience members) to make harsher culpability judgments of subsequent criminal suspects and increases support for conservative policies (Dixon, 2006; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Hurley, Jensen, Weaver, & Dixon, 2015). Other studies found that priming “the Black female jezebel” stereotype decreased support for a subsequent hypothetical Black female job applicant or welfare recipient (Givens & Monahan, 2005; Monahan, Shtrulius, & Givens, 2005). Furthermore,

exposure to TV-mediated messages reinforcing the Asian American “model minority” stereotype resulted in more positive stereotyping of Asian Americans but more negative stereotyping of African Americans among White audience members (Dalisay & Tan, 2009). Recent studies increasingly relied on implicit measures, such as recall tasks, to investigate priming effects (Burgess et al., 2011; Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004).

Cultivation, Long-Term Effects, and Chronic Accessibility

Whereas priming suggests short-term activation of a cognitive linkage used to make an immediate subsequent judgment, the repeated activation of such a link can increase its accessibility (Shrum, 1996, 2009). The chronic accessibility concept structures our current understanding of media cultivation. For example, if a news viewer encounters an individual cognitively related to a previously encountered mediated stereotype, he or she might make a judgment about them based on repeated exposure to this stereotypical depiction over time. As an illustration, a White news viewer repeatedly exposed to “the Muslim terrorist” stereotype may conclude that most Muslims must be terrorists. Reaching this conclusion repeatedly over time would lead to the chronic accessibility of the stereotype (e.g., automatic association of an individual with a stereotypical trait due to prior repeated activation; Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). In other words, cultivation refers to the long-term shaping of social reality from repeated prior media exposure (see Chapter 5 in this volume). Many media effects studies rely on the cultivation/chronic accessibility perspective. For instance, Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) and Dixon (2008a, 2008b) found that long-term exposure to news programming led to increased support for conservative crime policies among mostly White news consumers. These policies included three-strikes legislation, the death penalty, decreased support for Black crime victims, and increased anti-Black sentiment (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Other media stereotyping scholars found that daily television consumption among largely White samples cultivates anxiety towards Asians (Atwell Seate, Ma, Chien, & Mastro, 2018).

Social Identity Theory/Social Categorization Theory

A growing number of scholars note that group identity can determine both media consumption patterns and potential effects (Atwell Seate, Cohen, Fujioka, & Hoffner, 2012; Fujioka, 2005; Harwood, 1997; Mastro, 2003). Our personal identities can become tied to our perception of our own group in relation to other groups. Social categorization theory argues that the higher the salience (e.g., importance) of a particular category to an individual, the greater the ingroup favoritism he or she will demonstrate (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, Billings, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Media scholars have demonstrated that exposure to a mediated outgroup member can increase ingroup favoritism (Mastro, 2003). The higher the group identification, the more television choices and related effects might be influenced. As a result, television selections in which one’s ingroup fares worse than an outgroup may be avoided or explained away (Mastro, 2003). In other situations where outgroup members fare worse than ingroup members, one may use it to categorize these members as threats or as subordinate (Atwell Seate et al., 2012; Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016). In the third situation where one’s ingroup may be positively or benignly portrayed, strong ethnic identification may mediate the potential effects of such a depiction.

Social Identity Theory's Explanation of White Viewer Effects

Much of the work in this area has been spearheaded by Mastro and her colleagues. For instance, Atwell Seate and Mastro (2017) found that those with strong ingroup identification exposed to immigrant-threat stories expressed active (e.g., direct, perceivable) and passive (e.g., indirect, difficult to perceive) harming behaviors against immigrants. These authors used social identity/social categorization theory to advance the notion of intergroup emotions that might result from such media exposure. This notion states that group members with high group identification levels will experience the same emotions. Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Kopacz (2008) performed an experiment in which Whites were exposed to either White or Latino characters in a script. They found that exposure to the White characters increased racial identification and the predicted academic success of the character. Similarly, Mastro (2003) found that White audience members exposed to Latino criminals in a fictitious program reported higher self-esteem, but they offered more justifications for bad behavior when exposed to a White criminal.

Social Identity's Role in People of Color's Mediated Stereotype Resistance

Researchers have also increasingly explored the role of ethnic and social identity in how people of color respond to mediated stereotypes about themselves (Abrams, 2010; Abrams & Giles, 2007, 2009; Fujioka, 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008). First, it should be noted that audiences of color's media consumption patterns indicate high media usage levels (Nielsen and the National Newspapers Publishers Association, 2013; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Blacks and Latinos consume 13 hours of media a day, whereas Whites consume only 8 hours.

Second, ethnically targeted media may strongly influence audience members of color (Bleakley et al., 2017). Some studies have found that Black television exposure lowers perceptions of science competence among Black youth, while mainstream media lower Black children's overall self-esteem (Gordon, 2016; Martins & Harrison, 2011). However, a number of studies have considered the role of moderators in these effects, especially ethnic identification.

Numerous studies specifically looked at rap music and found ethnic identity to be a crucial variable for understanding the potential influence of rap on Black audiences (Dixon, Zhang, & Conrad, 2009; Epps & Dixon, 2017; Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2009). For instance, Black women with strong ethnic identification (e.g., the belief that Black women are beautiful) showed fewer negative effects (e.g., body dissatisfaction) after viewing thin models in music videos compared to Black women with weak ethnic identification. New media platforms such as Facebook and other social media sites allow one's ethnic identification to drive music sharing behavior. As a result, Black users with strong ethnic identification tend to share music containing positive themes (e.g., political awareness) rather than negative themes (e.g., misogyny). Finally, Abrams and Giles (2009) found that Latinos' views of their status in society positively predicted their use of media consumption for ethnic identity reinforcement.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Digital media platforms present a ripe area for future exploration by scholars. Much of the prior work in this area investigated representations in video games, finding that many gender and race related stereotypes continue to pervade gaming systems (Burgess et al., 2011; Waddell, Ivory, Conde, Long, & McDonnell, 2014; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). At the same time, digital news overly associates Blacks and Latinos with poverty, emphasizing a connection between

Latinos and immigration policy (Josey, Hurley, Hefner, & Dixon, 2009). As traditional media migrate to digital platforms, emerging media will continue to be the focus of researchers' attention.

Social media might be particularly ripe for future investigations. Many users receive, consume, and share entertainment and news content via social media. Social media's unique characteristics may contribute to stereotype proliferation while preventing positive, social, personal, and public intergroup contact. For instance, social media algorithms that dictate what appears in one's newsfeed based on user preferences facilitate greater self-reinforcement of users' biased stereotypical perceptions (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008). Given what we know about social identity, this suggests new media may create significant barriers to stereotype reduction. In fact, such processes likely facilitate greater stereotyping of race and ethnic groups in the digital media environment compared to traditional media (Dixon, 2017c; Melican & Dixon, 2008).

Conversely, social and traditional media may also offer a kind of virtual intergroup contact that has the potential to reduce stereotyping under certain circumstances (Dixon, 2017c). As the world becomes transformed through emerging media, more of our social interactions will be mediated. Work on curbing traditional media stereotypes found that media-based strategies can serve to reduce stereotyping and prejudice (Ramasubramanian, 2007, 2011). Much more work needs to be undertaken to explore both of these possibilities.

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