Reality Television’s Influence On Racial Bias And Communication

Abstract

This paper explores the influence reality television has on its viewers; specifically, how it shapes African American’s self, social, and cultural identities and non-African Americans beliefs of them. Further, it discusses the importance of positive racial representation because how one perceives African Americans will determine how they will interact and communicate with them, if it is not avoided altogether. Reality television has consistently depicted African Americans negatively. This is problematic because much of what an audience knows, and will know, of African Americans is based on what they see on television. Lastly, this paper discusses the increase in media accessibility and how it is imperative to show positive depictions of African Americans. This paper examines various scholarly journals discussing the impact stereotypes have had on African Americans and the perception of their culture and self by non-African Americans. They include Tia Tyree (2011) and R.M. Entman (1990).

Keywords: reality television, stereotypes, franken biting, self-identity, social identity, cultural identity, docu-legal.

Television is the most popular source for entertainment for all ages, as well as the most influential form of media. Much of its power comes from its ability to reach more people at one time. Even when audiences aren’t watching television, they are thinking about what they watched, or they are talking about what they watched with a friend, family member, or colleague. Whether it is television shows and music videos perpetuating increasingly unattainable beauty standards and viewers taking drastic measures such as eating disorders and plastic surgery to attain it, or advertisements shown during commercial breaks influencing viewers to believe they need a product, television is constantly showcasing its power. Ultimately, television can shape audience behaviors and social and self-identities, as well as influence or reaffirm their beliefs about other people.

Racial representation on television, particularly of African Americans, then becomes especially problematic because much of what audiences may know about them is based on what they see on it, and their beliefs about them will correspond with how they are represented. By the start of 1990s more shows with a predominantly black cast began to air on network television including shows such as Family Matters (ABC 1989-1998), Fresh Prince of Bel Air (NBC, 1990-1996), Hanging with Mr. Cooper (ABC, 1992-1997) Martin (Fox, 1992-1997), and Sister-Sister (ABC, 1994-1999) (Haggins, 2008). They were popular amongst both African Americans and non-African Americans. However, around this same time, reality television also started becoming popular and has only gotten more popular.

Although the network shows portrayed African Americans positively, reality television shows portrayed them negatively. The most common descriptors audiences used to describe African Americans on reality TV is argumentative, ignorant, loud, and uneducated (Tyree, 2011). By the mid-2000s, there was a noticeable decline of black centered network television shows. Author Tia Tyree (2011) argues this was problematic because as the amount of network television

shows decreased, the amount of reality television shows increased. Additionally, Catherine Happer and Greg Philo (2013) say that viewers who do not have much experience with African Americans are more susceptible to believing they must be how they are portrayed on reality television because it is how they are primarily shown. Similarly, Herman Gray (1989) says reality television portrayals of African Americans impacts how other people relate to them, and people will view these depictions on television as a reflection of the real world. Essentially, how one perceives African Americans will determine how they will interact and communicate with them, if it is not avoided altogether.

Literature Review

Since the earliest days of television, there have been concerns about the underrepresentation of African Americans. But It is not necessarily that they are absent from television, rather its underrepresentation of positive representations. Author Samuel Robert Lichter (1988) claims in his article Does TV Shape Ethnic Images, “About one-third of people say that the ethnic characters they see on television affect their attitudes toward ethnic groups in real life.” He argues some audience members are unable to distinguish differences in fiction and reality on the television screen. Lichter goes on to say the real problem stems from reality television portraying caricatures rather than the real person. It comes to a point where producers don't bother experiencing the culture and people; they rely on stereotypes. Davis and Harris (1998) defined stereotypes as ‘‘negative and or misleading characteristics of a category of people used to predict and explain behavior.” They go on to say, “stereotypes do not simply appear in America’s media system. They develop over time through repetitious portrayals of specific types of individuals, which eventually contribute to the formation and sustainability of stereotypes about African Americans.” Even if it is unintentional, reality television conditions audiences to associate negative characteristics with African Americans as a whole.

Modern Reality Television

Although reality television had been around since the late 1940s with shows such as Candid Camera (ABC 1948-2014), The Dating Game (1965-1973), and An American Family (PBS 1973), it started becoming more popular in the early 1990s. One of the more popular reality television shows was The Real World (1992-present). It first aired on MTV in 1992. Some critics go as far to say it paved the way for modern reality television (Reiss & Wiltz 2001). The formula of the show places seven strangers from diverse backgrounds together and proceeds to film how they interact. Early seasons primarily dealt with politically charged fights between cast members about sexuality, racism, and homophobia, while later seasons became much more dramatized and focused on partying and fights between cast members about who has more Instagram followers.

The Rise of the Talk Show

Along with reality television shows in the early 1990s, talk shows were becoming more popular. Steven Reiss and James Wiltz (2001) argue the formula was much bigger than the show itself and is what made the genre more popular. The entire premise of the talk show genre used to be dominated by Oprah, Ricki Lake and Montel. Early guests were not nearly as over-the-top as guests became toward the end of the nineties when the formula started to change significantly.

In fact, The Jerry Springer show (NBC, 1991-2019), which is known for its controversial plotlines and guests, originally focused on civil and political issues. In a push for higher ratings, there was a major production shift and the show started doing more controversial topics and began having caricatures on as guests. These types of episodes became more popular and producers exploited this.

The Reality of Reality TV

The title of reality television gives the impression that what is shown is reality; however, the title is misleading. As Tia Tyree (2011) puts it, “The reality of reality television is that the programming is not real.” She goes on to specify that “much of reality television is constructed and contains fictional elements.” Many of the shows are either scripted, or the people are manipulated into certain situations for situations to play out. Essentially, they are “staged and constructed as a situation-comedies or dramas” (Tyree, 2011). Author James Poniewozik (2012) also brings forth a few ethical concerns about reality television. He discusses the popular method, ‘franken biting’ as being manipulative, and defines it as “the trick of splicing together quotes from different contexts to make participants say what the producers need to, or, more egregiously, creating dangerous situations or at least encouraging them, whether by plying house-guests with booze or making entertainment out of addiction or extreme weight-loss competitions,” (Poniewozik, 2012). He further argues reality television leaves the audience to “use their varying levels of personal experience as the key barrier to judging the reality of the show,” and says this negligence only instigates further racial bias.

Racial Profiling

Critics argue that reality television allows stereotypes to flourish and are regressive to the strides made during the civil rights movement (Cooks, Leda & Orbe, Mark 1993; Demo, D & Hughes, M 1990; Oliver, M. B. 2003). Kimberly Barlow (2011) goes as far to say they promote outright racism. When producers and casting directors of reality television shows screen cast members they intentionally go after people who will play off a stereotype. After all, reality shows must be interesting and entertaining, must have conflict and resolution, as well as heroes and villains; people look for familiarity and this familiarity grew from stereotypes that are constantly being touted as the truth (Tyree, 2011). Essentially, producers and casting directors do not care about the impression they are putting forth by consistently depicting African Americans in a negative light. They want the loud mouthed, aggressive black person who will instigate and be a part of drama to further a story line. It is especially troublesome when audiences already have a preconceived belief about African Americans being stupid and aggressive from previous television shows and they are suddenly “proven right.”

Cops

Reality television isn’t only limited to social experiments in the vein of The Real World, as well as talk shows and dating games. The more popular the reality television genre became, the more subcategories were created; this now includes what is known as the docu-legal subcategory (Reiss & Wiltz 2001). The most popular show under this subcategory is the show Cops (FOX, 1989-2013). The premise of Cops follows real life police officers around during patrols and vice and narcotics stings and arrests (Prosise, T & Johnson, A, 2004). Officers are also filmed discussing their view on crime and criminals. The show first aired on March 1989 to

high praise and ratings. Although the show was a hit, some criticized the show for being polarizing and reinforcing racist beliefs of audiences about crime and who commits crime. They believed the show should have never been in production (Prosise, T & Johnson, A, 2004). This is not to say African Americans don't commit crime, but the focus of the show tends to center on them. Prosise and Johnson go as far to say African Americans are targeted. Additionally, Prosise and Johnson state, "most people report that their information about crime comes through the media rather than through direct experience." Audiences become fearful of African Americans without even having firsthand experience with them and unfairly associate all crime with them.

Many people develop expectations based on their beliefs and are inclined to ignore or reject information that is inconsistent with these beliefs. These individuals look for information that supports stereotypes. Unfortunately, television audiences will believe what they watch is a true representation of their culture and the people within it (Entman, 1990). As Entman explains, it becomes more problematic if these individuals have "no frame of reference or experience in their own lives with which to compare or conflict with what they have seen." When communication and interaction is limited or nonexistent, television is more likely to influence their thinking.

Self, Social, and Cultural Identity

Robert Lichter (1988) expresses concern that the negative stereotypes portrayed on reality television may consequently give African Americans a negative self-image and impact the construction of their self, social, and racial identity. He says, "The absence or low status of their television counterparts may encourage them to limit their own aspirations." However destructive reality television may be, people still look to it for a sense of what's socially acceptable and desirable. Similarly, Albert Bandura states, "stereotypes on reality television matter because they can be a potent agent of social learning" (p. 35). Because children are more impressionable, they are more susceptible than adults to television's influence. They are more likely to imitate behaviors they see on tv. And when what they see on television is reinforced by their environment, they are more likely to internalize what they see. To make matters worse, non-African Americans will make judgements about them based on these stereotypical images. This can result in bullying, which will further cause African Americans to have a negative self-image (Demo, D & Hughes, M. 1990; Gandy, O. H. 2001). When one's self-image is tarnished, they will believe no matter what they do or say, they will be viewed as the loud mouthed, aggressive criminal, and all of their abilities and potential will be undermined because of the perception reality television gives to non-African Americans.

The Effects on African American Communities

While what is shown on reality television does not reflect all social realities, some African Americans use reality television to develop scripts about their own race. The commonplace of stereotypes has gotten so out of hand that when African Americans aren't playing the loud mouthed, violent stereotype, they are called out for not being "black enough, or wanting to be white, or even that they hate their own race" (Demo, D & Hughes, M. 1990; Gandy, O. H. 2001). Gandy (2001) argues reality television stereotypes are creating resentment within their own race. In a study mentioned by Gandy, African Americans did not view their own race favorably. These opinions were based on television depictions that they also started to believe.

In the process of distancing themselves from these negative depictions, they began to look down on their own race. Additionally, out of fear of being forced out of their community and called a race traitor, they avoided communication with non-African Americans; specifically, with Caucasians. The paradox here is that some Caucasians believe what they see on television, and without communication they can't learn the portrayals are not accurate, and African Americans go on to believe they are disliked.

Prime-time TV Portrayals

Although African Americans continue to be shown frequently on network television shows, Scholars have still expressed concern over the depictions of their race as it may still set a precedent for how they will be perceived (Mastro et al., 2008). While the characters aren't overtly stereotypical, African Americans are largely categorized as criminals or gangsters, particularly in crime procedurals such as Law and Order (NBC, 1990-2010) and Criminal Minds (CBS, 2005-present). Usually in these shows there is an African American playing the role of a detective or judge, however, their role as the criminal tends to stick more with audiences (Oliver, M. B., 2003).

Dana E. Mastro et al., authors of Exposure to Television Portrayals of Latinos: The Implications of Aversive Racism and Social Identity Theory, express concern that subtle racism remains prevalent in prime-time. They argue that because minorities remain largely underrepresented on prime-time that even the slightest stereotype may prove to have substantial consequences in perception and relationships between other races, especially amongst Caucasians.

Furthermore, author Tia Tyree (2011) argues there still isn't enough multiculturalism in mainstream series, especially to counter the negative depictions reality television puts out. However, she then goes on to say that prime time shares responsibility for perpetuating negative depictions of African Americans. This is primarily because most African Americans who appear in prime-time crime procedurals tend to be restricted to roles playing the criminal and are characterized as uneducated and violent. When these are the characters they are mostly playing, it does send a message that they really must all be criminals and gang members. Afterall, as Robert Lichter states:

Television exercises its greatest power over those who do not hold strong opinions or who have no opinion or information about a particular topic or group of people. Here, television may be playing a vital informational role. In dealing with a variety of socially relevant topics such as racial and ethnic relations, TV not only entertains, it conveys values and messages that people may absorb unintentionally. This is particularly the case with young People. (para. 2).

Lichter further argues that because television minimizes human interaction, audiences are more susceptible to believing what they see on television. They develop false perceptions of the world and people. Subsequently, this creates further barriers between communication. In fact, the decrease of communication coincides with the availability of media access (Tyree, 2011).

Consequently, even if producers did not intend to perpetuate a stereotype, because routine criminality can be a reality to some viewers, it can still backfire in ways that support a negative self-image for the individual or reinforce negative views of the culture by outsiders. Television certainly has the power to legitimize characters and behaviors. What is shown of African

Americans might not be blatant racism, but even subtle racism can make just as big of an impact because viewers may not have a big enough frame of reference to know better and lump all African Americans into one. Leda Cooks and Mark Orbe (1993) believe stereotypes will always be present in television; both network and reality. Moreover, they wonder if one way to resolve the issue is to acknowledge stereotypes, albeit in a humorous way. Of course, some believe any acknowledgement is a detriment to social growth (Entman, 1992).

Reclaiming Stereotypes

The ABC sitcom Black-ish (ABC, 2014-present) depicts an upper middle-class black family. The main character and father, Dre, is a Marketing Executive and his wife, Bo, is a Doctor. Although the show has received criticism for the characters being “too white,” the show tries its best to steer away from negative images and reinforcing stereotypes of African Americans. The show maintains the integrity of black culture and the black experience. Historical links of black culture are often expressed by Dre through a series of thought-provoking monologues that are in response to a stereotype or drawback from systematic racial bias.

One of the show's most notable episodes, “The Word,” delves into modern and historical usage of the ethnic slur, nigger, and its desensitization in Hip-Hop, a largely African American musical genre. In the episode, ‘Hope’ the premise centers on police brutality and the stereotype of the “angry black man.” While the show tackles these issues in a comical approach, it doesn’t take away from the message. In the episode, Dre tries his hardest to come across as harmless because people expect him to be violent. Later, because of the angry black man stereotype, he becomes hesitant to drive his drunk, white female neighbor home from a neighborhood watch meeting because of racial profiling by police. Dre believes the police will accuse him of kidnapping and grand theft auto. Even though he risks racial profiling, he and his brother-in-law eventually agrees to drive his neighbor home. When Dre is pulled over by the police, his response is to run. At the end of the episode, audiences find out Dre’s brother-in-law, who stayed behind, gets roughed up by police.

Discussion

By tackling social and political issues in a comical approach, Black-ish creator, Kenya Barris, argues that the show takes away the power of stereotypes. The question then becomes, does acknowledging stereotypes humorously minimize racism? The way Black-ish introduces social and political issues, along with historical context, in a comical way certainly brings attention to the issues. Barris says It isn’t heavy handed, so non-African Americans are more likely to listen to the messages. Even in popular network shows with African American casts such as Girlfriends (UPN, 2000-2008) and Fresh Prince of Bel Air, the characters never really discussed stereotypes and its cultural impact, so they never corrected stereotypes.

However, Toby Miller (2004) argues there isn’t currently enough balance and multiculturalism in network television shows to counter the negative images and take away the damage reality television has left behind. African Americans remain largely marginalized so any talk of stereotypes is regressive. Miller concludes it is imperative that changes need to be made because of the growing numbers of media access. According to a recent Nielsen study, on average, American adults watch six hours of television per day, while the average American child watches five hours of television per day; and all in various forms, including smartphones,

tablets, and computers. About fifty percent of Americans now have subscription services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu in their homes, and have even more choices for watching specific types of shows, Nielsen said. Network television shows are reaching larger audiences than ever before.

Conclusions and Future Study

This paper sought to determine the degree in which stereotypes of African Americans perpetuated by reality television shows affected perceptions of African Americans in real life. No matter how much criticism reality television receives, it will always be a staple in prime-time and be influential and shape pop culture. In order to resolve the issue of racial stereotypes being perpetuated, producers, writers, and casting directors must be open to depicting a more balanced portrayal of African Americans to offer a fuller picture of their culture, and social and self-identities. It is also important for them to not be put in situations that accentuate the negative traits reality television depicts as it only normalizes these negative characteristics, and in effect it “marginalizes the issue of race and social construction of blacks” (Miller, 2004). As media becomes more accessible, it’s important to make sure there are favorable portrayals, otherwise societal views of, and communication with, African American will decline.

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