
PERPETUATING RACIAL STEREOTYPES THROUGH COLLEGE MEDIA CAMPAIGNS OF BLACK STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The stereotype threat hypothesis (STH) attempts to explain the processes that label people of color as unqualified (Fischer and Massey 2007; Massey and Mooney 2007; Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, and Downing 2003; Scott, Atwell, Gerber, Higginbotham, Kant, Oaxaca, Yee, Richardson, and Adler 1996). This hypothesis argues that people of color tend to be psychosocially labelled as students who cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and therefore, require either affirmative action or diversity and inclusion initiatives in the student enrollment process, as well as both federal and state financial aid to succeed in higher education (Schouten 2015; Fischer and Massey 2007; Massey and Mooney 2007; Lowery, Unzueta, and Knowles 2006; Crosby et al. 2003; Scott et al. 1996). The STH also contends that students of color with low SAT scores are destined to fail in higher education (Schouten 2015; Fischer and Massey 2007; Massey and Mooney 2007; Lowery et al. 2006; Crosby et al. 2003; Scott et al. 1996).

The stereotype threat, or the fear or anxiety to underperform in the context of racial discrimination and oppression, validates hegemonic, macro-level concepts of race, merit, and academic achievement by conceptualizing that people of color are both under-qualified and intellectually inferior to Whites (Babbie 2014; Massey and Mooney 2007; Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Crosby et al. 2003; Scott et al. 1996). These hegemonic, macro-level concepts can be directly linked to micro-level processes of both discrimination and stigmatization by associating students of color with the STH (Babbie 2014; Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Crosby et al. 2003; Scott et al. 1996).

To shed light on our understanding of the complex processes that perpetuate stereotype threats, I will conduct a content analysis on racialized representations of Black students. The purpose of this

content analysis is to examine different representations of Black students in media campaigns of the California State University (CSU) System.

This investigation has set out to analyze the complex processes that perpetuate stereotype threats. The researcher seeks to investigate what unexplored processes may contribute to the harmful mechanisms of the stereotype threat. The proposal is broken down into four sections: (1) literature review, (2) research question/thesis, (3) methodology, and (4) conclusion:

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

The literature reviewed below analyzes the stereotype threat through lenses of affirmative action, ingroup versus outgroup conflict, psychological perceptions of racial privilege, policy debates, and the effects produced by competition in higher education (Schouten 2015; Crosby et al. 2003). To analyze the stereotype threat, some scholars surveyed private and public institutions of higher education (Lowery, Unzueta, and Knowles. 2007; Lowery, Unzueta, and Knowles 2006). Other scholars drew on national survey data, historical mechanisms of white privilege, and policies, such as affirmative action to scrutinize the stereotype threat (Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Fischer and Massey 2007; Massey and Mooney 2007; Scott et al. 1996). In some cases, researchers investigated the stereotype threat and intergroup conflict by surveying non-educated people, asking them about their beliefs of racial privilege and the pros and cons of affirmative action (Jordan-Zachery and Seltzer 2012; Crosby, Iyer, and Sincharoen 2006; Lowery et al. 2006).

There are also some gaps and limitations in the studied stereotype threat literature. These gaps and constraints are addressed in this section. The final part of the literature review discusses the main philosophical worldviews and theoretical perspectives that are guiding this investigation. This section concludes with the researcher reflecting on their subject position, and how it influences their views and conclusions of the literature review.

STEREOTYPE THREAT, AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, AND GROUP CONFLICT

Affirmative action (AA) is a policy initiated by former U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s (Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Massey and Mooney 2007; Lowery, Unzueta, and Knowles 2006). These U.S. Presidents sought to correct the historical mechanisms of discrimination and inequality aimed at people of color and gender by requiring employers and educational institutions to use AA in employment and student enrollments (Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Massey and Mooney 2007; Lowery et al. 2006).

From the onset, AA was opposed by most Whites or the majority group. AA, as a policy, created conflict between the White majority and fringe groups of color and gender (Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Massey and Mooney 2007; Lowery et al. 2006). Most Whites viewed AA as a form of reverse racism, arguing that AA discriminates against Whites with higher SAT scores by providing resources and opportunities to people of color with lower SAT means (Rothenberg and Mayhew 2012; Massey

and Mooney 2007; Lowery et al. 2006). This perception is known as the mismatch hypothesis (Fischer and Massey 2007; Lowery et al. 2006). This hypothesis argues that students of color with lesser SAT scores will fail in higher education, as opposed to Whites with higher SAT means (Fischer and Massey 2007; Lowery et al. 2006). Consequently, the primary group refutes AA as it undermines the American ideal of fair competition and meritocracy (Lowery et al. 2006).

Also, the majority group argues that AA creates a stereotype threat for people of color (Schouten 2015; Fischer and Massey 2007). As a result, AA undermines its intended beneficiaries by stereotyping people of color as individuals who could not succeed on their own but require federal and state assistance to prosper in higher education (Crosby et al. 2006:593). This group argues that the effects created by the stereotype threat cause students of color to internalize their intellectual inferiority, doubting their potential to succeed in high testing scenarios. As a result, underqualified students of color dropout out of college (Lowery et al. 2007; Lowery et al. 2007).

Although the primary group seeks to undermine the positive effects of affirmative action, scholars have shown the exact opposite (Fischer and Massey 2007; Lowery et al. 2006; Crosby et al. 2006). That is—that students of color with incoming lower SAT means perform at the same level as White students with higher incoming SAT means (Fischer and Massey 2007; Lowery et al. 2006; Crosby et al. 2006; Scott et al. 1996).

Perceptions of Privilege and Stereotyping

Some researchers acknowledge that most Americans do not like to think of themselves as prejudiced and that prejudices and discriminatory behaviors resulting from stereotypes of people of color can lie outside conscious awareness (Crosby et al. 2006). Yet many Americans hold prejudicial stereotypes about people of color (Jordan-Zachary and Seltzer 2012; Crosby et al. 2006). Some prejudices by members of the hegemonic group appear very deeply rooted (Jordan-Zachary and Seltzer 2012; Crosby et al. 2006).

When unconscious assumptions of racial prejudices are brought into conscious awareness, stereotypes resist change (Crosby et al. 2006:600). For example, when people encounter members of target groups who violate their (negative) stereotypes, they often maintain the stereotype in the face of this disconfirming evidence by subtyping the group member as someone who is not prototypical of the group (Crosby et al. 2006:600). One reason that high-status group members may have difficulty acknowledging group inequality is that they wish to preserve the illusion of having legitimately earned all their outcomes (Crosby et al. 2006:600). White males seem to have an overdeveloped sense of entitlement, as they often do not acknowledge the structural advantages they have received as a group. Members of high-class status groups resist acknowledging group inequality because it involves a cognitive awareness that members of their group have participated in acts of discrimination (Crosby et al. 2006:600). These scholars demonstrate that framing inequality

in terms of the advantages bestowed to whites is more threatening to whites than inequality framed in terms of the disadvantages suffered by blacks (Crosby et al. 2006:601).

Lowery et al. (2007) demonstrated how the existence of racial privilege threatens Whites' self-image, forging a link between their need for positive self-regard and their acknowledgment of privilege. Whites' perceptions of subordinate group disadvantage (i.e., anti-Black discrimination) are not directly tied to self-concern (Lowery et al. 2007:1232). Lowery et al. (2007) found that Whites' policy views are influenced by their self-concerns—that is, by their need to think highly of themselves (Lowery 2007:1246).

Limitations and Gaps in the Literature

The literature analyzed the stereotype threat by demonstrating how students of color internalized their inability to succeed in higher education. This approach is limited because it frames the stereotype threat as a linear prophecy that is self-fulfilled by students of color while excluding external prejudicial attitudes by members of the primary, hegemonic group.

Some theoretical studies have analyzed how members of the primary, hegemonic group contribute to and reproduce the stereotype threat (Schouten 2015; Lowery et al. 2007; Crosby et al. 2006). For example, Lowery (2007) theorized about White perceptions of privilege and stereotyping and their impact on the stereotype threat. Both groups of scholars did not attempt to empirically analyze how the members of the primary, hegemonic group contribute to the stereotype threat.

Similarly, Fischer and Massey (2007) could not figure out what was triggering the stereotype threat. These scholars employed secondary national survey data to study the stereotype threat, focusing on how students of color internalized the stereotype threat. However, they did not analyze how White student's perceptions of privilege and stereotyping of people of color. Consequently, Fischer and Massey created a linear understanding of the stereotype threat that can only be produced, reproduced, and fulfilled by people of color.

The researcher will bridge these methodological limitations by empirically analyzing how media campaigns marketed by the CSU system have the potential to promote stereotypical representations of Black students, and in doing so, create, reproduce, and perpetuate the stereotype threat. Analyzing the stereotype threat as an exterior process allows the author to propose that senior-level administrators for the CSU system qualify as members of high-status groups. Consequently, findings from my study may shed light on how some CSU senior-level staff because of their high-status have difficulty recognizing group-inequality created by the stereotypical representations of Black students marketed in media campaigns by the CSU.

There is also a gap in the stereotype threat literature. Lowery et al. (2007) issued a call for more research that elucidates the nature of all the threats associated with perceptions of privilege and

discrimination (Lowery et al. 2007:1246). This type of investigation can provide strong evidence that for Whites, the need for positive self-regard marks White privilege as an "unsafe" lens through which to view inequity (Lowery et al. 2007:1246).

My research attempts to answer this call by exploring how various CSU media campaigns may negatively stereotype Black students as beneficiaries of affirmative action. As a result, some White students may psychologically perceive that they are unjustly excluded from resources by Black students and the CSU system that seems to favor them. This perception by members of the hegemonic, primary group can produce the necessary mechanisms needed to create, reproduce, and perpetuate the stereotype threat.

Philosophical Worldview and Theoretical Perspective

This investigation blends social constructivist and transformative worldviews (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The study is social constructivist because it “analyzes how the stereotype threat is formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell and Creswell 2018:8). The inquiry is transformative because its approach to investigating the stereotype threat contains an action agenda for reform that may change the educational institutions in which individuals attend or work (Creswell and Creswell 2018:9). The investigation is also transformative because it addresses social issues of discrimination and inequality directed at people of color via the stereotype threat. Blending constructivist and transformative worldviews enables me to investigate how Black students are stereotypically represented through various media campaigns of the CSU system, as well as identify some of the meaning-making processes that perpetuate stereotypical representations of Black students.

There is both an insider connection and outsider disconnection between being a student researcher and Latinx. The insider connection is that the Latinx community has also been adversely affected by racial stereotypes and stigmatized as being under qualified and intellectually inferior to Whites. Also, as a student, I have witnessed racial intergroup tension between White, Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, and Muslim students, professors, and senior-level administrators. A student lived experience provides the researcher with great insight into both the ethnic tensions and epistemology differences that are pervasive on college campuses. The outsider disconnection is that the researcher is not an official member of the Black community.

Consequently, some may propose that the researcher is not entitled to analyze stereotypical representations of Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators. However, essential to note is that historically some White people were part of both Dr. Martin Luther King’s and Cesar Chavez’s civil rights movements. These exemplars demonstrate how successful civil rights movements have successfully linked ‘outside’ ethnic allies within ‘insider,’ ethnic, social movements.

RESEARCH QUESTION

A content analysis of various campaign images will enable the researcher to address the following main research question and sub-question: 1) How are Black students represented through media campaigns of the CSU system? And 2) What are some of the meaning-making processes that perpetuate stereotypical representations of Black students in such media campaigns?

METHODS

Research Design

My research will follow the latent research method based on content analysis. Additionally, the researcher will also employ a manifest content analysis; however, the bulk of the content analysis will be investigated by using a latent research method. A content analysis tactic will enable me to demonstrate how various CSU media campaigns may stereotype Black students as beneficiaries of affirmative action. As a result, some White students may psychologically perceive that they are unjustly excluded from resources by Black students and the CSU system that seems to favor them. The more Whites identify with their group, the more they protect the support of the ingroup (Lowery et al. 2007:972). Consequently, some Whites may create and reproduce the stereotype threat, not people of color.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

Media campaigns of Black students marketed by the CSU system were downloaded from online CSU websites, which included class catalogs, philanthropic brochures, commencement ceremony pamphlets, and other media. I will refer to this first collection of CSU media campaigns as the primary units of analysis or Data Set A. Data Set A is a convenient selection of both online media and paper artifacts that were posted online or published and distributed by the CSU. Data Set A consists of media campaigns marketed by the CSU for the years 2016 to 2019. A preliminary analysis of Data Set A yielded, $N = 50$ photos, of which $B = 40$ fulfilled the criteria needed to examine the stereotype threat hypothesis. The eligibility criteria required to analyze the stereotype threat necessitates that media representations link people of color to the following rhetoric and visuals employed in CSU media campaigns: 1) rhetoric and visuals labeling Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators as coming from underrepresented, poor, and disenfranchised communities; 2) rhetoric and visuals applauding Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators for becoming the first child in the family to attend college; and 3) rhetoric and visuals honoring Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators for athletic achievements. The above criteria were selected because they were unexplored methods in the existing stereotype threat literature.

As the project develops, the researcher plans on creating a random subsample of images that will be taken from the convenient sample of Data Set A. A subsample of images may be collected by randomizing units of observation that visually or rhetorically frame people of color as the following: 1) socially ill; 2) hailing from uneducated families; 3) academically talented but economically

insolvent 4) from the ghetto, and 5) in perpetual need of tutoring and ‘free money’ from the state and federal governments in order to succeed in higher education.

Data set A may also be randomized by selecting random photos from each brochure, catalog, online media, and other paper artifacts, and then analyzing them by looking for visual patterns and stereotypical rhetoric that are associated with Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators. For instance, the researcher may find that Black students are usually placed on the cover of class catalogs, commencement ceremonies, and philanthropic brochures. In contrast, Black professors and senior-level staff may be pictured in the back of the record or not pictured at all. Data Set A consists of 500 total images, of which a preliminary analysis of 50 has been conducted; therefore, future research may reveal enough data to create a randomized subsample from Data Set A.

Ethical Issues

All the media artifacts gathered in preparation for this investigation are public secondary data; thus, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is not necessary. Note: some of the media artifacts employed have both the names of the students and the institutions they attend. Out of respect for both students and institutions, student identity will remain anonymous, while individual CSU institutions will be given a fictitious name.

Data Analysis

This analytic procedure is guided by a visual and rhetorical analysis of stereotypical Black representations. A visual and textual analysis of Data Set A will be employed to determine which media campaigns are stereotype threat eligible. At the start of data analysis, the researcher will conduct open coding of a wide range of visuals and rhetoric linking the stereotype threat to stereotypical media representations of Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators (Emerson 2011:188). However, as the project develops, the researcher will move from an inclusive process and select a few core themes to pursue focused, deductive coding, and integrative memoing (Emerson 2011:188). Emerging issues will develop from core themes that may be visual, rhetorical, or both.

The visual and rhetorical analysis will demonstrate how the absence of any prejudiced behavior by members of the hegemonic majority group may contribute to the stereotype threat, and in some cases, may even create and reproduce it. The hegemonic majority group will be defined as Whites. The White population in the United States is 60.4 percent, while in California, it is 36.8 (United States Census Bureau 2020). Most studies on the stereotype threat focused on the internalized feelings by students of color; however, this approach places the stereotype threat on people of color while disregarding the contributions made by members of the hegemonic majority group. A visual and rhetorical analysis will enable the researcher to do the following: 1) investigate how Black students are represented through various media campaigns of the CSU system, 2) identify some of

the meaning-making processes that perpetuate stereotypical representations of Black students, and 3) link stereotypical media ads of people of color to potential prejudicial and biased perceptions made by members of the hegemonic majority group.

Methodological Limitations

Surveys of members of both students of color and the hegemonic group could be employed to assess further individual awareness of stereotypical images of Black students and professors. However, due to time and economic constraints, surveys will not be conducted in this investigation but may be performed in another study.

Critics of the content analysis note that this approach is limited in terms of validity and reliability (Babbie 2012:334)¹. Other scholars may view the sample size used in this inquiry as too small, or not representative of both private and public educational institutions outside of California.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this content analysis is to examine stereotypical representations of Black students in media campaigns of the California State University (CSU) System. While most studies on the stereotype threat focused on the internalized feelings by students of color, this inquiry approach links stereotypical representations of Black students to potential prejudicial and biased perceptions made by members of the hegemonic, majority group.

A preliminary analysis of Data Set A revealed that over 90 percent of images from CSU class catalogs, philanthropic brochures, commencement ceremony pamphlets, and other media contained stereotypical representations of Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators². As a result, I propose that a new policy barrier may be needed to protect people of color from being exploited and preyed upon by institutions of higher education.

The potential future impact of this proposed project may reveal that media campaigns marketed by the CSU system create and reproduce the stereotype threat, not members of the Black community. As a result, new policies may be implemented that forbid the CSU system from promoting stereotypical representations of Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators in media ads. Without a policy barrier, the Black community may continue to be stigmatized and misconstrued in various CSU media ads.

¹ Essential to note is that a review of communicative processes reduces problems of validity in content analysis inquiries (Babbie 2012:334). This investigation scrutinizes the communicative processes of the stereotype threat via stereotypical media representations of people of color. Consequently, the concreteness of media representations employed in this examination strengthens the likelihood of validity (Babbie 2012:334).

² The meaning-making process embedded in creating higher education media campaigns may both unintentionally or intentionally result in discrimination and stigmatization aimed at people of color.

Future research on various representations of Black students, professors, and senior-level staff may also suggest that some CSU senior-level administrators from the hegemonic majority group qualify as members of high-status groups. Because of their high-status, some CSU senior-level staff may also have difficulty recognizing group-inequality created by stereotypical representations of Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators marketed in media campaigns by the CSU. Therefore, more research is needed to investigate the unexplored nuances surrounding both various representations of people of color in CSU media campaigns, and the meaning-making processes that perpetuate stereotypical images of Black students in such media campaigns.

The main limitation of this project is that surveys and interviews of students, professors, and senior-level administrators were not conducted. Surveys and interviews could yield better insight regarding both individual awareness and the consequences associated with stereotypical images of Black students, professors, and senior-level administrators in college media ads. Another limitation is that the sample size selected may not be representative of the studied Black population or the marketing strategies of the entire CSU system. The researcher plans on bridging these limitations by obtaining the funding needed to conduct interviews and surveys, as well as increase the sample size to N = 1000 photos of the entire CSU system. If research funding is obtained, then the researcher will pursue IRB approval to conduct both interviews and surveys.

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