

BLACK MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS: THEIR PERSPECTIVE OF MEDIA AND ITS STEREOTYPICAL ANGLE OF “BLACKNESS AND MALENESS”

By Ronald L. Parker and James L. Moore III

ABSTRACT

Drawing from a larger study, this qualitative investigation examined how seven undergraduate Black males perceived their representation in today’s new digital, media-driven society as they persisted in college. Utilizing biographical questionnaires and one-on-one semi-structured interviews, two major themes emerged from the data: (a) negative stereotypes in media and (b) the fallacy of a postracial society. The findings provided useful and applicable insight on how Black male students may construct and project a healthy identity in today’s digital media culture.

Keywords: *Black males, college students, representation, mass media*

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Historically, images and identities of African American males have been constructed by the dominant media culture in an often intentionally negative and distorted manner that extends beyond U.S. borders.¹ Jane Rhodes juxtaposes the African American experience under colonial rule with America’s obliteration of marginalized groups’ cultural and self-image.² Over the years, researchers and scholars have documented the negative representation of African Americans throughout various forms of mass media, including literature,³ film,⁴ music,⁵ television,⁶ and new media.⁷ As Darron Smith has argued, White journalists, supposedly objective and unbiased, continue to assault Black male images in popular media.⁸ Negative portrayals of Black males are often manufactured and projected through both digital and non-digital media. This study seeks to examine how undergraduate Black males perceive media representations of themselves in today’s digital media environment.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois exposed the racial layer of race on America’s social infrastructure and its “color line” cultural legacy. He posited that African Americans had a deeply rooted “double consciousness” that lay at their hearts. “One ever feels his twoness, an American, A Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁹ He argued that the only way Blacks can develop a healthy self-concept within American society is to reconcile the dual nature of their identity. The applicability of double consciousness is more relevant than ever for the African American male students in today’s digital media culture, especially those who attend predominately white institutions (PWIs).

This qualitative investigation, focused on a single research question—how do African American college males perceive their own representation in the media—provides a contribution to existing literature on how Black males perceive themselves in today’s digital media society.

RESEARCH METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted at Big Midwest University (BMWU), a large PWI located in the Midwestern part of the United States. At the time of data collection, the racial composition of undergraduate males was 75.6 percent White, 7.1 percent nonresident alien, 5.4 percent Asian American/Pacific Islander, 5.3 percent African American, 2.9 percent Hispanic/Latino, 1.8 percent two or more races, 1.6 percent unknown, and 0.2 percent American Indian on the main campus. A purposeful cross-selection of seven undergraduate Black males was included in this study. The majority of the participants were juniors and seniors, with the exception of one freshman and one sophomore.

As indicated in Table 1, high school grade point averages (GPA) varied between 3.4 and 4.5, with a mean of 3.87. BMWU accepts two college entrance exam scores (ACT and SAT), and the participants' scores ranged from 18 to 29 for the ACT and 1250 to 1900 for the SAT. Only two participants, Barry and Trey, took both exams. The participants' college GPAs varied from 2.95 to 3.7, with a mean of 3.27. Jay and Trey were raised in suburban communities during their secondary education.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

Name	Age	Rank	Major	Community Background	H.S. GPA*	Current GPA*	ACT Results*	SAT Results*
Barry	24	Senior	Electrical & Computer Engineering	Urban	3.78	2.95	21	1340
Paul	23	Senior	French	Urban	3.8	3.3	n/a	1250
Germaine	20	Sophomore	Construction Syst. Mngmt	Urban	3.4	3.2	18	n/a
Jay	18	Freshman	Public Health	Suburban	3.75	n/a	n/a	1900
Nathaniel	21	Junior	Political Affairs	Urban	3.9	3.7	29	n/a
Rico S.	23	Senior	Nursing	Urban	4.5	2.98	26	n/a
Trey	21	Junior	Mechanical Engineering	Suburban	3.98	3.525	25	1350

Note: Cells with n/a signify that the participant did not disclose the information.

* - Self-reported overall score from each participant.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative interviews allow researchers to observe the complex meanings and central themes of participants' worlds.¹⁰ The lead author administrated the biographical questionnaires, which provided pertinent descriptive data that included a range of demographic information (e.g., academic major, GPA, online social network usage, etc.). Individual face-to-face interviews were also utilized to gather data from each participant. Each individual interview ranged from sixty to ninety minutes, and the follow-up interviews ranged from thirty to sixty minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed.

DATA ANALYSIS

A constant comparison approach was utilized to analyze the biographical questionnaires and interview data for the study.¹¹ More specifically, the authors coded important relationships and concepts that surfaced from the data.¹² They constantly compared the biographical questionnaire data with the interview data to develop categories and/or merge major concepts and relationships. Research memos were also used to help confirm or cross-check any interpretations.¹³ Throughout the data analysis process, the constant comparison approach was applied until data saturation occurred. Strategically, constant comparison of multiple triangulated data sources helped establish the trustworthiness of the results.

FINDINGS

According to Strauss and Corbin,¹⁴ theoretical constructs are often used to explain phenomena in trustworthy qualitative research studies. Pertaining to the participants' perceptions of how the media portrays Black males, the following themes emerged from the data: (a) the prevalence of negative stereotypes and (b) the fallacy of a postracial society.

Negative Stereotypes in Media

The "double consciousness" that Du Bois describes emerged in the way participants characterized how mass media misrepresentation continues to foster negative stereotypes and images of young Black males as inferior. For this study, many participants described their belief that negative stereotypes in mainstream media still exist. For example, Rico S. (a nursing student) stated:

Albeit somewhat subjective, the media does not portray African American males in a positive light. With the exclusion of athletic coverage of African American

males, the media exposure of this demographic more often than not portrays a violent, barbaric, and uncontrollable perception of some aspects of African American males in general. For example, documentaries concerning African American males cover more gang-related footage than they do participation in higher education. Also, the only display of affluent men in this category is marked by individuals in entertainment who, relatively, may not be the best role models for viewers. Altogether, it seems as though African American males are always viewed as an issue that is in need of repair.

Rico S. recognized differences in the way the mass media presents positive representations of Black men in the domain of athletics and entertainment but more negative ones elsewhere. It is also evident that Rico S. recognized differences in the amount of mass media coverage. Many of the participants in the study expressed their frustration at how media consistently present a negative stereotypical slant of "Blackness" and "maleness." For example, Trey (a mechanical engineering student) illustrated his frustration with this ongoing pattern:

[I know] the stats but choosing not to believe them; most often Black males are depicted to be dead or in jail by the time they are 24. Most of college undergraduates that are Black and especially Black male are not truly expected to graduate. African American males are constantly profiled and that representation is something that we must work to overcome everyday of our lives, to prove ourselves. The natural assumption that we [Black males] belong or are equal is negated by stereotypes, media, or titles that are placed upon African American males repeatedly.

Paul, a French major, articulated how stereotypes are perpetuated in movies and popular television shows:

[I] think . . . the media is how African American males develop bad representations in the public eye, especially movies like American Gangster, Training Days, and through the TV shows. Because for the most part, they play out different negative stereotypes about African American males.

FALLACY OF A POSTRACIAL SOCIETY

After the election of President Barack Obama, the narrative that race was no longer a social barrier in America for the advancement of Black folks proliferated in popular media.¹⁵ While expanding on their perceptions that Black males are generally misrepresented in the media, several participants articulated disagreement with the notion that America has become a postracial society. Barry, an electrical and computer engineering major from the Washington, D.C. area, offered his thoughts:

Man, please Mr. P., postracial society? Really? I still get the crazy looks at night. The car creeps, when I walk by some White person who just left their... I mean[t] just because we [American society] have a Black president [doesn't] mean anything.

Jay, a freshman, likewise stated his opposition to this popular myth:

If we are in a postracial society, why are we still dealing with the political antics of the Tea Party? They are some of the most racial ideological people I have ever seen. The verbal abuse and negative comments they make about our president is crazy.

Similar to the other participants above, Germaine, a sophomore majoring in construction system management, expressed his resistance to the postracial argument:

I have had the chance to study abroad in China. When I came back from that experience, I learned that there are many forms of discrimination, besides race, but race is extremely noticeable here in America. Personally, I don't believe that we are in a postracial society. If that [is] the case, why did we have our building [a common space where Black students hang out] defaced with a racial message ... We aren't in a postracial society ... racism still lives on this campus.

Nathaniel, a junior majoring in political affairs, recounted a heated discussion on a social networking site he had



engaged in with one of his White male counterparts. He saw the exchange as evidence that the United States was not even close to being a postracial society:

This dude tried to argue with me about Obamacare being for minorities only. He posted an article to try and prove his point. I'm down for a health debate because that's my major, but this dude came right up to the line of using the N-word. I had to delete him from my friends list. I guess he felt that, since we have President Obama everything is [an] even [playing field].

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study clearly believed that inferior images and stereotypical misrepresentations are still prevalent in contemporary American society. Racial misconceptions are filtered through the dominant media, largely created by Whites. The participants contested the reality of a postracial society because their experience on college campuses debunked such notions. Both mass media and popular culture are spheres where ideological struggles between subordinate groups and dominant culture often occur.¹⁶

In American society, too often African American males are confronted with hegemonic cultural dominance¹⁷ and are forced to resist such social forces in developing healthy self-concepts within both traditional and new media culture. Additionally, the management of their interior "self" and exterior "image" becomes important as "racial images in the mass media are infused with color-coded positive and negative moralistic features. Once these symbols become familiar and accepted, they fuel misperceptions and perpetuate misunderstandings among the races."¹⁸ However, the rise of social networking sites may allow African American male users to construct their own self-image and self-presentation in these digital spaces.¹⁹ Social networking sites, like BlackPlant, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, may provide digital spaces for Black male users to reconstruct their identities with greater control and some level of authenticity.²⁰

The findings in this study present an opportunity for scholars, educators, and laypersons to hear the voices of Black males as they navigate American social spaces and environments. Black males may utilize social media to voice their opinions, concerns, and challenges. Through social media, Black males may construct their own images more conducive to supporting one another. Furthermore, social media may provide Black male students an opportunity to authentically express themselves in an environment free of negative misrepresentations and stereotypes. More research is certainly needed on this topic, particularly as it relates to social media. However, this study offers a foundation for future examinations of these dynamics.

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