Black Youth and Mass Media: Current Research and Emerging Questions

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Introduction

Young African Americans have not participated as long as their white counterparts in the media culture industry (Nightingale 1993). In truth, it is difficult to discern a substantive relationship between black youth and the mass media prior to the 1960s. The initial exclusion of blacks from popular media culture is attributable to two main factors: 1) a lack of discretionary income on the part of black youths and their families and, 2) racial exclusionary practices on the part of the culture industries. Important economic and educational advances since the 1960s have sharply increased black household and discretionary income (Farley and Allen 1987) and also help to establish a viable African American consumer culture.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s the film (Guerreo 1993; Watkins 1998) and television industries (Gray 1995) began responding to the shifting sensibilities of black youth culture by creating products that specifically targeted black youth. It was also during this time that the wider distribution of television occurred, thus exposing black youth to American consumer culture in ways unknown to previous generations (Nightingale 1993).

A primary aim of this paper is to outline some of the important research findings and emergent issues that examine the changing relationship between black American youth and the mass media industry.

Black Youth, and Media Stereotyping: The Media Effects Paradigm

The widespread distribution and consumption of mass media continues to generate intense debate concerning the extent to which products like film, television, and music video affect youth behavior and social development. A primary aim of the "effects paradigm" has been to explore how media socializes youth into behavior that impairs their ability to mature into socially responsible and productive citizens. As black youth have experienced greater access to the products and services manufactured by the mass media industry, additional questions have emerged. One specific site of inquiry involves the effects of mass media stereotyping on the self-esteem and cognitive development of black youth.

For most of its history the mass media industry has produced images that distort and misrepresent the complexities of the African American experience. Contemporary media representations of African Americans can be best described as paradoxical: blacks are simultaneously underrepresented and overrepresented in American media culture.

For example, blacks appear more frequently in both television (Zinkhan 1990; Licata and Biswa 1993) and magazine advertisements (Taylor 1995). But blacks are also more likely to appear in minor or background roles (Wilkes and Valencia 1989) or during black oriented programs (Licata and Biswa 1993).

Analysis of the television industry confirms that executives, writers, and directors tend not

to place African Americans in dramatic story-plots and programs (Gray 1995). Blacks are most likely to appear in genre formats (i.e., situation comedies, variety shows) that are non-serious, light-hearted, and non-threatening. Moreover, a study of local television news programs from twenty-nine cities found that African Americans tend not to appear as on-camera news sources, reporters, or be included in news stories about non-racial issues (i.e., the economy) thus leading to a pervasive form of marginalization (Campbell 1995).

Whereas blacks are underrepresented in many areas of mass media they are overrepresented in television sports broadcasts and crime and violence related portrayals. Ironically, Sharpe and Curry (1996) argue that while images of blacks in magazines has increased, this may actually be a counterproductive trend because blacks are predominantly portrayed in athletic roles. Similarly, Bowen and Schmid (1997) found that while images of blacks in mainstream magazines has increased there is little role or occupational variation. In this study, blacks were more likely to appear as athletes or musicians. Hoberman (1997) maintains that the athleticization of the black image reproduces and popularizes long-standing myths about biological and intellectual differences between blacks and whites.

Furthermore, studies demonstrate that when African Americans are portrayed in television news it is generally in aggressive, violent, or criminal roles (Peffley et al. 1996). Analysis of "reality-based" television programs produced two important findings: 1) violent crime was overrepresented and, 2) blacks and Latinos are disproportionately depicted as criminals (Oliver 1994). In one of the most extensive studies of television news, Reeves and Campbell (1994) found that coverage of cocaine use and violent-related behavior during the 1980s typically treated young black males and females as pathological threats to society. Also, a recent analysis of the film industry asserts that blacks tend to be restricted to low budget features that focus disproportionately on crime, violence, and youth delinquency (Watkins 1998).

How does the current image landscape affect the self-esteem and cognitive development of African American youth? Tan and Tan (1979) examined the effects of the limited portrayal of blacks in high-status occupations. These researchers tentatively conclude that heavy exposure to white-aimed television programming causes lower self-esteem among blacks. Similarly, in his ethnographic study of poor black youth, Nightingale (1993) argues that their relationship to mass media culture leads to serious social and psychological problems. He argues that, while black youth live in a world of unprecedented material abundance, conspicuous consumption, and media advertising, their poverty stricken status severely limits their ability to participate in a rapidly expanding consumer culture, thus leading to personal frustration, social stigma, and alienation.

Lee and Brown (1995) contend that black youth may be especially influenced by television advertisements featuring black athletes. They found that parents and teenagers frequently disagree and argue over purchase decisions of consumer products. Poor youth pursue possession of compensatory status symbols (i.e., expensive sneakers, clothes, jewelry) in order to help them negotiate social stigma and economic marginalization (Nightingale 1993).

Conversely, some media scholars contend black youth may not be negatively influenced by media culture because of the higher social status and professional roles blacks tend to portray. In her study of black and white youth, Dates (1980) concludes that blacks were

heavy viewers of black television shows and generally rated black television characters more positively than did non-blacks. Thus, she asserts that television does not have a negative influence on the self-esteem of black television viewers. Stroman (1986) examined cognitive development of black children in relation to their television viewing habits and concludes that black children display a very positive attitude toward blacks who appear in high status roles.

Stroman (1991) maintains that television both negatively and positively affects the social and cognitive development of black children and adolescents. Rather than generalize the presumed negative effects of television, Stroman believes the medium can provide youth with important knowledge about the world that is unavailable to them in their immediate environment. She acknowledges, however, that the extent to which television can be a means to enhance the self-concept of black children depends greatly on the intervention of parents, educators, and industry personnel guiding youth toward more educational oriented programming.

Black Youth: Media Socialization and Quality of Life Issues

Television viewership among black youth is higher than their white counterparts (Poindexter and Stroman 1981). Social and economic factors explain this trend (Greenberg and Dominick 1969). For example, high levels of television viewership tend to correspond with low economic status. Because poor and working class children are less likely to have access to non-school related extra-curricular activities, they may spend more time at home, thus increasing their viewership of television. Also, because black children are more likely to be reared in single parent households, they may not receive the same degree of parental supervision as white children. Consequently, black youth may be more likely to use television for companionship (Surlin and Dominick 1970-71).

Because of its accessibility and penetration of American domestic life, many researchers regard television as the most powerful form of media socialization. Insofar as television is a powerful agent of socialization, its effects are likely to be most pronounced on populations that view it most. High levels of television viewership have important quality of life implications for youth. Three of the most important quality of life indices include educational development, sexual behavior, and goals, aspirations or perception of life chances.

First, high amounts of television viewership among youth can contribute to lower levels of literacy. The time devoted to television reduces the amount of time youth have available to further develop and enhance their reading skills (Gaddy 1986; Stroman 1991). Second, television viewership may also influence youth sexual behavior. In a survey questionnaire of 391 adolescents, Brown and Newcomer (1991) found a relationship between their sexual behavior and viewing of sexual content on television. While causal direction was not clear from the data (i.e., did exposure to sexual content increase likelihood of sexual intercourse or vice versa?), the authors suggest the need for increase portrayal of the use of contraception on television. The findings have potentially grave quality of life implications (i.e., teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease) for black youth.

Finally, researchers note that mass media can also have an affect on the perceived life chances youth envision for themselves. The repetitious depictions of blacks in athletic roles creates a limited range of adult and professional role models for young black males and may even contribute to low levels of educational attainment (Gaston 1986; Bierman 1990).

Faced with few media images of successful African American men, young black males are especially vulnerable to the widespread marketing and commodification of black athletes.

In general, the study of media effects on the social, cognitive, and behaviroal development of black youth produces inconclusive claims at best. Measuring the effects of media on human behavior is a difficult enterprise. Researchers generally acknowledge that the cognitive development and behavior of youth are influenced by a wide range of institutions (i.e., schools, religioun), social relationships (i.e., parents, peer groups), and economic factors (i.e., poverty).

Black Youth and Media Culture: the Cultural Studies Paradigm

One of the most significant breakthroughs in media research in recent years has been the flourishing of cultural studies. In contrast to the "effects paradigm," the cultural studies approach is primarily interested in examining the ideological and political work media performs in the reproduction of social, economic, and political hierarchies (Hall 1977). Proponents of the cultural studies model contend that the sphere of media culture is marked by constant instability, ideological struggle, and cultural resistance.

This perspective has been especially adept at examining the complex ways black youth intervene in the production of popular media culture. Gray (1995) contends that media culture is an essential location to think and theorize about African American culture, representation, and politics. One particular site receiving increased attention from practitioners of cultural studies is hip hop culture.

The formation of hip hop culture illustrates how dramatically the relationship between black youth and the media culture industry has changed. This particular formation of youth culture developed in the context of profound social, economic, demographic, and spatial transformation (Rose 1994; Watkins 1998). The hip hop movement has developed into a fertile reservoir of youth culture and media production. Rap music is the most prominent expression of hip hop culture. I would like to briefly identify three notable research issues related to the production of rap music: 1) the role of technology; 2) the political aspects of the youth culture; and, 3) commodification.

Black Youth and Media Technology

Some analysts argue that rap music is the product of a rapidly evolving media and technological landscape. Whereas early critics of mass media (Adorno and Horkheimer 1989) argued that technology would stifle artistic creativity and lead to the routinization of recorded music, new technologies appear to be having the opposite effect; new sound mixing devices and video appear to be enabling new regimes of popular music production to emerge (Rose 1994).

Black Youth, Media and Cultural Resistance

Youth actively select from a varied field of media products and services in order to fashion their own distinct cultures and generational identities. Youth cultures commonly come into conflict with the presumed values, beliefs, and practices of mainstream society, thus they can mobilize distinct forms of cultural resistance (Hebdige 1979).

Many analysts argue that rap music enables black youth to cultivate a complex body of ideas, worldviews, and representations that generate poignant expressions of social critique (Stapleton 1998). Indeed, rap music is a multi-layered terrain of youth and media culture defined by various styles and sub-genres: neo-black nationalist rap (Decker 1994); gangsta (Kelley 1994); and feminist (Rose 1994). Rap music has also been criticized as excessively violent, nihilistic, and misogynistic (Ransby and Matthews 1993).

The Commodification of Black Youth Culture

Finally, the widespread distribution and popularization of rap music has generated questions regarding the effects of commodification on hip hop culture. Some critics view the global merchandising of hip hop culture as a form of social control and containment. The commodification of black youth culture, in truth, is a complex phenomena. While it is clear that the scope and direction of hip hop has been altered by the marketplace, it has also exerted a powerful influence on the global contours of youth culture (Stapleton 1998). An additional area that needs further exploration is the extent to which black youth have been intimately involved in the commodification of rap music and use it as a vehicle to create alternative niches of entrepreneurship and employment.

Conclusion

In short, the relationship between black American youth and the mass media industry has changed significantly over the last thirty years. These changes require future inquiries from both the effects and cultural studies paradigms to develop more nuanced methods, questions, and approaches in order to better illuminate and understand the complex ways the media industry both influences and is influenced by African American youth.

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