

TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE UNITED STATES: THE ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, MEDIA USE, AND GROUP IDENTITY AND VITALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the influence of television portrayals of ethnic minorities, particularly in the United States on group vitality and identity. The empirical evidence shows that certain television programs may influence minorities' perceptions of their group vitality and identities and media selection. This paper presents the effects of television depictions of minorities focusing on the individual differences perspective. Social identity theory, ethnolinguistic identity theory, uses and gratifications, and social identity gratifications help explain the role of individual differences on the use of media for social identity and group vitality.

INTRODUCTION

In the last several decades, there has been the evidence showing the change in television portrayals of ethnic minorities in the United States (Harwood, 1999; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Research shows the improvement of portrayals of ethnic minorities regarding the frequency of displaying minority characters and stereotypes of minorities on television (e.g., Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002). Thus, the question is whether or not the improvement of these television depictions of minorities influences their group vitality and identities.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the influence of the U.S. television portrayals of ethnic minorities on group vitality and identity. First, I provided theoretical frameworks explaining

group vitality and identity and media uses and gratifications. Second, I reviewed empirical research relating to television depictions of ethnic minorities. Third, I analyzed the effects of television programs on minorities' perception of their group identities and vitality. Finally, I provided a conclusion and recommendations for future research. In this paper, I focus on the four largest ethnic minorities in the United States: African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.

In the United States, television portrayals of ethnic minorities have influenced audiences' perceptions and stereotypes of minorities (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Television shows and its programs provide audiences with constructed realities. Audiences may relate their viewing of constructed realities on television with their real life

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world (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). As a result, these television programs may influence audiences' perceptions of their ethnic identities and other ethnic groups in the society.

Whether or not television programs depict the actual ethnic minorities' lives? In which way do television programs influence perceptions of ethnic minorities? Do television depictions of minorities increase or decrease group vitality? Whether or not television programs can satisfy ethnic minorities' needs of their group vitality and identities? To clarify these questions, I provide theoretical frameworks to understand group vitality and identity and media uses and gratifications by reviewing the social identity theory, ethnolinguistic identity theory, uses and gratifications (U & G), and social identity gratifications (SIG) and review the literature in regard to the influence of television exposure on group vitality in the following sections.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The depictions of ethnic minorities and majority concerning group identity and vitality in mass media, particularly in television, can be noticed in daily programs. Social identity theory and ethnolinguistic identity theory help explain the nature of group identity and factors influencing group vitality. In addition, U&G and SIG help understand individual differences in selecting different types of media to gratify their needs of group vitality and identity.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory explains social comparisons among social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity theory is based upon three general assumptions. First, people attempt to maintain or increase their positive self-concept in order to gain their self-esteem as a group identity. Second, so-

cial identity depends on the evaluation of social agreement within groups or across groups, which may be positive or negative. Third, people generally compare their own groups with other groups on the certain attributes and characteristics in order to evaluate their group identity. Positive social comparison is perceived as producing high prestige among group members, whereas negative social comparison is perceived as producing low prestige among group members.

According to social identity theory, people try to gain a positive evaluation through comparison of their in-group identity with out-group identity in order to differentiate their own groups from other groups. Achieving a positive evaluation of group identity can increase the group's dominance (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In regard to group's dominance, Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) proposed ethnolinguistic identity theory to explain factors affecting group vitality.

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory

Giles et al. (1977) suggested three major factors affecting group vitality: status, demography, and institutional support. The first factor is status, which includes economic, social, socio-historical, and language status. Economic status refers to the degree to which a group has a control over economic issues. Social status refers to the extent to which a group has the esteem for their group identities. Socio-historic status refers to a variety kinds of history that each group has during the group existence. Language status refers to a group's esteem of its language and culture.

The second factor influencing group vitality is demography. Demography involves the distribution of the group and the number factors. Group distribution factors include territory, country, and population. The number factors refer to the numerical information of group members including absolute number, birth rate, mixed marriages, immigration, and emigration (Giles et al., 1977).

The last factor affecting group vitality is the

institutional support. The institutional support refers to the degree of formal and informal representations a group has in the institutions. Formal support means whether or not a group has a control over a decision-making process in the institutions (e.g., mass media, business, and government). Informal support means the extent to which a group represents its own interests for public and private activities. Having both formal and informal supports in a group helps increase group power and group vitality (Giles et al., 1977). In addition to social identity theory and ethnolinguistic identity theory, U&G and SIG help understand individual differences and media use for social identities' needs.

Uses and Gratifications (U&G)

In regard to the use of media for social identity, Blumler (1985) pointed out that people who were in certain groups had different perceptions of media gratifications. U&G suggests that people are goal-oriented, active, and motivated in using different types of media to gratify their needs. U&G emphasizes the role of individual differences, media use, and choice. Basically, U&G has three major purposes: to understand how people use media to gratify their needs, to explain motives for media use, and to determine the outcomes of using media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Rubin, 2002; Rubin & Windahl, 1986).

Social Identity Gratifications (SIG)

Harwood (1997) provided the linkage between social identity theory and U & G to explain the uses of media to gratify people's social identities. He proposed SIG to explain how media gratifications affect group identity. According to Harwood (1997), people seek media messages that support their group identities. They tend to select messages that present positive depictions of their in-group identity. On the other hand, they tend to avoid particular messages that do not support their group identities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several scholars have been interested in examining the effects of television portrayals of ethnic minorities (Abrams et al., 2003; Gerbner et al., 1980; Greenberg et al., 2002; Harwood, 1997, 1999; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Some researchers examined how minority portrayals on television programs influenced people's perception of minorities (Gerbner et al., 1980; Greenberg et al., 2002; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Others looked at audiences in a more active role in using mass media. These prior studies investigated how audiences selected particular television programs to gratify their needs of social identity and group vitality (Abrams et al., 2003; Harwood, 1997, 1999).

Television Portrayals of Ethnic Minorities

Prior studies on the depictions of ethnic minorities on television revealed that minorities were underrepresented when they were compared to actual population (Ford, 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980). However, portrayals of minorities on prime-time television have been changing over the last decade (Greenberg et al., 2002; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Generally, the findings showed the improvement of television depictions of minorities regarding the frequency of portrayals and the distribution of ethnic portrayals. In prime-time television programs, minorities were presented more often, particularly African Americans (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

Greenberg et al. (2002) examined the distribution of minority characters in the prime-time series in the 2000-2002 and found that the distribution of characters on television shows was 76% Whites, 18% African Americans, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian Americans, and 0.2% Native Americans. They conducted several content analysis studies investigating the frequency of television portrayals among four ethnic minorities. They concluded that African American characters on television programs increased from 6% to 9%

from the 1970s to the 1980s and reached 11% in the early 1990s. Latino characters depicting in television programs have changed over the years. Latino characters decreased from 3% to 1% during the 1950s through the 1980s and from 3% to 2% between 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 seasons (Greenberg et al., 2002). Asian American characters were depicted only 1% in the mid-1990s and increased to 2% in the 2000-2001 seasons (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Native American character was not found in prime-time television programs in the analysis of the 1996-1997 seasons (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

The frequency of minority portrayals on prime-time television has been increasing for African Americans and Asian Americans, but not for Latinos and Native Americans. Nevertheless, minorities still have been depicted in minor roles, in crime drama, and with stereotypes and misrepresentation of minority groups (Greenberg et al., 2002). These negative depictions of minority groups may influence their perceptions of group identities and vitality.

Effects of Television Portrayals on Group Identity and Vitality

Several empirical studies on the influence of television depictions of minorities examined media messages in relation to group identity and vitality (Abrams et al., 2003; Harwood, 1997, 1999). These studies suggested that people would generally select television programs that depicted their ethnic groups in a positive way to gratify their needs for maintaining social identities and group vitality.

Harwood (1997) examined how audiences in different age groups selected their favorite television programs. He found that audiences tended to watch the shows that portrayed the characters of their age groups. Younger adults preferred to view the programs depicting younger adults as leading characters. On the other hand, older adults preferred to watch the programs that had older adults as leading characters.

Later, Harwood (1999) investigated the relationship between age identity gratifications and age group identification on television viewing. The results revealed that age identity gratifications and age group identification were related to audiences' viewing preferences. Audiences who showed a strong identification to their age identities would select the programs depicting their own age groups to gratify their needs for group identities and the sense of belongingness to the groups.

Abrams et al. (2003) extended Harwood's (1999) study and suggested that minorities who viewed particular programs that portrayed minorities' characters would not only increase their group identities, but would also increase their group vitality. Abrams et al. (2003) pointed out that the frequency of portrayals of minorities on television programs nowadays allowed minority groups to select television programs to gratify their in-group vitality more than in the past years. Thus, some audiences who were motivated to select television programs to gratify their group identities and in-group vitality might have different perceptions of their own group identities from those who were not motivated or randomly selected television programs (Abrams et al., 2003).

Abrams et al. (2003) compared selective audiences and nonselective audiences pertaining to their perceptions of group identities and vitality. They suggested that minority members who intended to select the programs to gratify their needs for group identity were more likely to select television programs depicting their ethnic minorities in a positive light. These positively depicting programs generally portrayed ethnic minorities as having high status, high numbers of representation, and strong institutional support. These viewing choices of minorities would help them increase their sense of belonging to a group (Abrams et al., 2003).

Critical Consideration

According the review of literature, it implies

that television portrayals of minorities in the United States can influence minorities' perceptions of their group identities and vitality. The effects of television are not pervasive to all audiences in the same way. Some audiences may be more influenced by television programs than others.

From Harwood's (1997) finding, minority members prefer to watch the shows that portrayed the characters of their age groups. This finding can be applied to minority viewing preferences in general. Nevertheless, it is possible that some minority members may not like to view the shows depicting their own age groups. Thus, they tend to avoid particular television programs depicting their group characters. These group members may have a negative social comparison between their groups and other groups, which may reflect their perceptions of group identity. As Tajfel & Turner (1986) noted, negative social comparison is perceived as producing low prestige to group members. Abram et al. (2003) also pointed out that minority group members who selected to avoid particular programs had different perceptions of group vitality from those who did not select to avoid the programs.

Some studies employed SIG to explain viewing preferences and group vitality. These studies suggested that group members preferred to watch programs featuring their group characters in positive aspects, which would help them to increase their group identities and vitality (Abrams et al., 2003; Harwood, 1997, 1999). If these positive portrayals can increase minority group identities and vitality, it is possible that negative portrayals may also decrease minority group identities and vitality.

To increase group vitality, levels subjective vitality of group members should be considered. Levels of subjective group vitality are based upon three factors: status, demography, and institutional support (Giles et al., 1977). Each ethnic minority differs in its status, demography, and institutional support. The more numbers of group members, the more formal and informal institutional support,

and the higher status of a group, the more likely the group will survive and develop their group vitality (Abrams et al., 2003).

Therefore, minority members who are strongly identified themselves to their groups and hold strong group vitality should be less likely to be influenced by television programs. On the other hand, minority members who are less strongly identified themselves to their groups and do not hold strong group vitality should be more likely to be affected by television programs. Accordingly, positive portrayals of minority characters on television programs may help increase group vitality to any minority group members. However, negative depictions of minority characters should not decrease group vitality for members who have high status and more strongly identified to their groups, but may decrease group vitality for those with low status and less strongly identified to their groups.

Generally, portrayals of ethnic minorities have been improved, particularly for African Americans and Asian Americans, in terms of the frequency of representation and the distribution of characters (Greenberg et al., 2002). According to ethnolinguistic identity theory, it is possible that group vitality of African Americans and Asian Americans may be strengthened because of an increasing number of their groups' representation on television programs. On the other hand, a decline in the depiction of Latino characters may influence Latino group vitality one way or another.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Portrayals of ethnic minorities in the U.S. prime-time television programs have been changing over the years. We see more minority characters, particularly African Americans and Asian Americans displaying in television programs (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). This change provides minority groups more opportunities to se-

lect programs representing their groups, which may help increase their group identities and vitality.

The world of constructed realities on television can lead minority members to view their group identities and vitality differently from the actual world. Also, the misrepresentation of minority characters on television may influence minorities' perceptions of their own identities and vitality. In general, group members tend to select programs that support their group identities or depict their groups in positive light. On the other hand, they tend to avoid programs that do not support their group identities or negatively depict their groups. People usually select particular programs to satisfy their own needs that reinforce their group identities and vitality (Harwood, 1997, 1999).

The role of individual differences on media use and group vitality and identity helps us understand how group members use media to gratify their needs of group vitality and identity. However, there still have been a limited number of studies in this area. Several areas need further exploration. First, future research should examine the linkage between the frequency of minorities' portrayals on different types of programs (e.g., crime drama, comedy, or reality shows) and social identity gratifications. Different types of programs may generate different minorities' perceptions of their group vitality and identities. Second, future research should explore relationships among group vitality (e.g., status, numbers of members, and institutional support), different characteristics of audiences (e.g., different traits), viewing habits (heavy or light), and different types of television programs. Investigating these relationships should help extend our knowledge of the role of individual differences on people's perceptions of group vitality and identity.

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