

Mammy Depictions in Film: Effects on African American Women's Perceptions, Beliefs, and Eating Behaviors



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ABSTRACT

One common stereotype to emerge from motion pictures is the mammy. For decades, the mammy role has been used to represent African American women in film. Mammies are often portrayed as overweight, desexualized, motherly figures. The purpose of this research is to examine participants' perceptions about their bodies, self-esteem, and eating behaviors based on the mammy influence. A survey was conducted at a western university via an online format to determine if audiences are negatively affected by depictions of mammies in film. Results were discussed in terms of beliefs and behaviors among African American women compared to other demographic groups.

Mammy Depictions in Film:

Effects on African American Women's Perceptions, Beliefs and Eating Behaviors

Mass media has the power to affect values, norms, and visual standards embraced by audiences in the United States (Harrison and Cantor 1997). One negative stereotype to emerge from motion pictures is the mammy. The mammy image originated in the southern United States and is one of the most pervasive images of African American women. Since the 1900s, mammies have been rampant in the film industry. The mammy is often portrayed as an overweight, large-breasted, motherly figure, who served Caucasian families in the South (Chen et al. 2012). In modern films, the mammy has shifted to add to comedic relief.

In early years, the mammy represented a good wholesome caretaker of Caucasian families, yet a mean spirited, insensitive woman toward her family (Dixon 2000). Today, mammy depictions are still shown in modern films such as *The Help* (2011), *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009), and *Big Momma's House* (2000).

Over the years, the researcher has witnessed numerous films highlighting African American women in confining roles. Usually these roles offer a narrow scope of one particular illustration of African American women which fails to show them in roles that are more diverse. Because individuals receive countless messages through popular culture, it is important to show more than one representation of African American women instead of focusing on a particular era in time. Research

has found that exposure to stereotypes can influence actions and behaviors that emulate a particular generalization from exposure to portrayals in film (Campbell and Mohr 2011). The purpose of this study is to determine if mammy depictions play a significant role in how African American women view themselves and how they feel others perceive them based on mammy portrayals in film. Do mammy portrayals in film affect the perceptions of African American women compared to other racial groups?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stereotypes

Categorizations based on widely acceptable traits often determine how others are perceived. Hall (1997) states that roles of individuals are often assigned based on certain traits, which we associate with someone based on a particular role such as a parent or businessperson. Although stereotypes classify an individual, they do so by reducing a person's value (Hall 1997). Stereotypes diminish individuals through simplified and exaggerated characteristics and insist that these traits are natural qualities.

Racial stereotypes in particular have been shown as determining factors in labeling someone. They emerged from mass media and film and have implications on audience members (Dixon 2000). Stereotypes are a range of traits, attitudes, behavioral tendencies, and goals connected to a particular member of a social category (Chen et al. 2012). The problem with stereotypes is that they allow individuals to make assumptions without substance.

For over a century African American women have been portrayed in film, but early depictions often showed African American women in confined roles. The roles given to African American women were almost exclusively mummies, and these stereotyped roles have run rampant in mass media since their inception (Chen et al. 2012). A mammy was a domesticated worker who was employed as a caregiver to Caucasian families (Chen et al. 2012). Researchers found that stereotypical mammy illustrations have been perpetuated by the media and spread throughout communities (Brown, Johnson, and Griffin-Fennell 2013). African American women were cast in real life as maids, which at first may have seemed a natural transition to film. However, a quick glance of Tyler Perry's popular *Big Momma* franchise shows limited roles for African American women and continues to portray them mostly as only one type of character.

Mammy

One of the most frequent stereotypes to emerge from film is the mammy archetype (Chen et al. 2012). A mammy is one of many other stereotypes that organize developments of race (St. John 2001). In the film, *Gone with the Wind*

(1939), the mammy character is introduced to audiences and is played by Hattie McDaniel (Chen et al. 2012). African American women were often real-life caretakers of children, and they exhibited the qualities of a “grossly overweight, large-breasted woman who is desexualized, maternal, and nonthreatening to White people” (Fuller 2001; Hudson 1998; Jewell 1993 as cited in Chen et al. 2012, 116). Even to this day, mammy depictions in film are common. However, they limit African American women’s roles in society because the audience often makes generalizations based on what is shown in film (Chen et al. 2012).

Disappointingly, along with positive qualities of mammy stereotypes (loving caregivers of children) mammy images have always offered outwardly negative attributions of African American women, showing them as outside the female norms of thinness (Chen et al. 2012). This is especially the case for African American women in film who are typically depicted as heavier in comparison to other racial groups. Despite the fact that researchers have found that in the African American community, cultural factors may protect African American women from developing body dissatisfaction with being overweight (Lynch 2005) one wonders what the overall implications are for the female African American audience.

One study examined the influence of mammy characters on African American women’s views. In this study, participants were shown a three-minute clip of a mammy from the 1959 drama, *Imitation to Life* and were then asked to rate their perceptions on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) based on the movie clip (Givens and Monahan 2005). The film portrayed an African American woman as a servant in a powerless position. As hypothesized, the researchers found that participants associated the character with terms related to the mammy stereotype.

Over the years, the mammy in films has shifted to a comedic approach. Males portraying mummies have hit motion pictures (Domcocco 2007). Although White men have dressed as women in film, Milloy (2009) found that White males dressing up as Black women does not carry the same weight as African American males playing a mammy due to America’s history of humiliating persons of color. The trend of African American men dressing up in fat-suits has reinforced negative stereotypes in the African American community (Svetkey, Watson, and Wheat 2009). African American males mocking women in costume reinforces the stereotypical image of mummies being desexualized and unwanted.

A key example of the mammy stereotype’s earning power and potential audience influence is Tyler Perry’s *Madea* franchise which has made over \$600 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo 2014). *Nutty Professor* movies have also been popular in entertainment culture making over \$200 million (Box Office Mojo 2014). In the film, Eddie Murphy plays an overweight, nurturing mother, who cooks and offers advice to her son, Sherman Klump. According to critics, the

abundance of men dressing as excessively overweight Black women is due to a simple formula of entertainment that sells (Chen et al. 2012). Thus, these films demonstrate the power that the mammy archetype generates across popular culture while at the same time mummies are now largely being cast as the target of jokes. Mammies continue to have a strong presence in film; therefore, these representations need to be studied further.

Eating Behaviors

Images in film have been shown to impact the way audiences perceive themselves and may ultimately affect their behavior. In one study, nineteen adult consumers indicated how they thought seeing someone who is overweight would negatively influence their consumption of indulgent food (Campbell and Mohr 2011). If women viewed images of overweight mammies, they may alter their eating habits depending on how they view the mammy figure.

A study found that Black women's perceptions have been influenced from both the small and big screens in different ways (Chen et al. 2012). Scholars point out that African American women's fear of abiding to the mammy image may prompt them to excessively diet in attempts to distance themselves from the mammy archetype (West 2012). Research also suggests the opposite effect in that the exposure to an overweight character in film may lead to an increase in food consumption (Campbell and Mohr 2011). Women who view images of stout characters in film may become more inclined to eat more if the overweight character is viewed favorably (Campbell and Mohr 2011). In another study conducted by Harrison and Cantor (1997), they also found that eating behaviors are influenced by media consumption. Thus, film serves as a tool for individuals to receive messages and learn about how they should look and behave. The current research will analyze the impact of mammy representations on African American women compared to other races.

Self-esteem

Another area of research suggests that negative effects of stereotypical portrayals in media on self-esteem vary between racial groups. Comedies and dramas are still the genres used largely today to depict African American women (Sanders and Ramasubramanian 2012). Studies have found that African American roles in film have translated from the big screens into the minds of audiences. African Americans are depicted less favorably than their Caucasian counterparts (Mastro and Kopacz 2006). Consistent research has found that the images of African American women on the big screen affect how African American female audiences perceive themselves (Chen et al. 2012). Thus, in order to better understand the relationship between African American women viewing mammy stereotypes in film and potential negative implications for audiences, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How much exposure to mammy portrayals in film do African American women have compared to other racial groups?

RQ2: What are African American women's perceptions of mammy portrayals in film in comparison to other races?

RQ3: How are African American women affected by mammy portrayals in movies?

METHOD

Design and Procedures

The study was a cross-sectional survey administered online through SurveyMonkey.com. This study was approved by the Communication Studies Human Subjects committee of the western university. The purpose of this survey was to examine perceptions of African American women about bodies, self-esteem, and negative influence of mammy portrayals in film. These views were also compared to other racial groups. Other variables such as demographics were also collected.

Participants

Initially, the sampling procedure was purposive. A link to the online survey to African American sorority groups at a large, western university asking them to take the survey. The sample size was too small for inferential statistical analysis; therefore to increase the sample size, convenience sampling was used. Additional participants of various racial groups were recruited from a communication studies class for participation in the study. In exchange for their participation, students were given extra credit. These additional participants allowed for comparisons of African American women's perceptions to those of other racial groups. Participants' data remained confidential. All participants were given informed consent. Participants were of various backgrounds: 18.4 % African American, 5.75% Biracial, 35.6 % White, 1.2 % American Indian, 6.0 % Asian, and 26.4 % were from multiple racial backgrounds.

Measures

The survey collected information about perceptions of self-esteem and negative influence of mummies in film. The main variables of interest will be explained. To measure perceptions about *negative influence*, the researcher created ten Likert-type items. Participants were asked to rate their agreement on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree) to each of the ten items. Some of the items include: Do you view yourself negatively after watching films with mammy figures, and have you ever been negatively affected by images of mummies in film? (See Appendix). To create a negative influence scale, the ten items were averaged to determine if participants were negatively influenced or positively influenced.

Reliability rating was poor, so a factor analysis was conducted, resulting in a two-factor solution. The two factors were *negative effect* (a six-item solution) which included items such as: Do you feel negatively impacted by stereotypes, and do you think mammy portrayals in films affect the way others see you? The second scale was *negative influence* (a four-item scale) and it included questions like: Do you feel inspired by mammy portrayals in film (reverse coded)? Have you ever altered your eating habits?

To measure *self-esteem*, Rosenberg's (1989) Self-esteem Scale was used. This is a nine-item Likert-type scale. Participants rated their self-esteem by agreeing to statements on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree). Example items include statements such as: On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. I wish I could have more respect for myself (reverse coded).

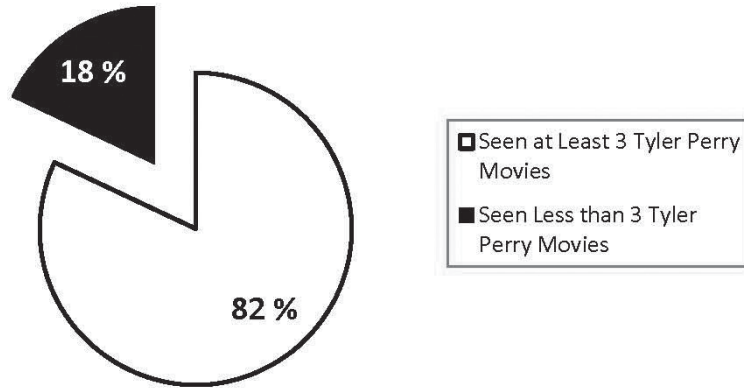
Data on participants' *movie viewing habits* were also collected. Questions included: How often do you go to the movies; how often do you watch films with mammy depictions; and have you seen three or more Tyler Perry movies in the last two years? Participants also rated their self-perception of *body type* (thin, average, overweight, very overweight). Another category of athletic body type was collected but deemed unusable in relation to the other four ratings because of its overlap with self-rated body type. Demographic data such as age, race, and sex were also collected and were used for analysis in answering research questions.

RESULTS

RQ1: How much exposure to mammy portrayals in film do African American women have compared to other racial groups?

In order to answer RQ1, an independent samples t-test between African American /Biracial women and those who were not was conducted. Women who identified as African American or Biracial (African American/White) were combined to form a single group and then compared to those who identified as other racial and ethnic groups. Results show that on average over the past two years, African American/Biracial women watched no more mammy stereotypes in film ($M = 2.27$) than other racial groups ($M = 2.09$), $t(90) = 1.48, ns$. For further analysis, an examination was made of the amount of Tyler Perry movies specifically viewed among African American women. In this sample, most African American women had watched at least three Tyler Perry films over the last two years (See Figure 1). Thus, although there was no difference in viewing African American female stereotypical portrayals between racial groups, it is clear that most African American women have been exposed recently to stereotypes of African American women in film.

Figure 1. Viewing of Modern Mammy Films by African American Women



Note: N=21

RQ2: What are African American women’s perceptions of mammy portrayals in film compared to other races?

To examine African American women’s perception of mammies in film, descriptive statistics were run. The measure rated women’s agreement on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree). For these two measures, higher scores mean greater agreement with negative effects on African American female audiences. Among African American/Biracial women, the average score on Negative effects was ($M=2.80$) with scores ranging 1.83-4.0. The average negative perceptions score was ($M=2.46$) also near the midpoint score of 2.5, with the range of negative perceptions scores 1.25-3.2. What this shows is that in general, African American women didn’t feel the mammy stereotypes affected the way they see themselves but that it did affect how others seen them. Interestingly, however, self-esteem average score was ($M=1.48$), below the midpoint, indicating a low self-esteem.

RQ3: How are African American women affected by mammy portrayals in movies?

In order to explore relationships between African American women’s perceptions, correlations were used to assess the relationship between the variables: negative effects, negative perceptions, and self-esteem. For self-esteem, lower scores mean lower self-esteem. There were no statistically significant associations found between negative effect and negative perception $r(14)=-.51, ns$, negative perceptions and self-esteem, $r(15)-.19, ns$, and self-esteem and negative effects, $r(15)-.38, ns$.

Overall, the results show no difference in the amount of films with mammy portrayals viewed by African American women compared to other racial groups.

There were no significant associations found between the variables of interest, negative effects, negative perceptions, and self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand African American women's perceptions of mammy depictions, body satisfaction, and negative influence in comparison to other racial groups. It is apparent that African American women's self-esteem scores were slightly lower than the scale mid-point, but the connection with exposure to mummies in film deserves more attention. Although the two findings were non-significant, the ratios are worth further study to determine the effect of mammy portrayals on African American women compared to other racial demographics.

Stereotypical images in mass media can influence one's perceptions and views about themselves and others. Mammy depictions in film do not help break barriers between races because they only focus on one specific era in time. When contributions of African American women are constantly portrayed in subordinate positions, this does not help in diversifying images to audience members.

Because one common way that individuals learn is through mass media, audiences' perceptions about others may be limited when a particular stereotype is constantly displayed. Additionally, depictions of mummies reinforce to African American women that they are limited to the constraints of being a servant, maid, or in a powerless position. African American women reported watching many Tyler Perry films, and they scored moderately low on the self-esteem measure. The connection between stereotype exposure and low self-esteem is not clear however. Nonetheless it demands further investigation.

With this information, we can learn to diversify representations in order to break away from common portrayals in film such as the mammy. When audience members are constantly bombarded with repetitious characters, audience members may develop an understanding that anyone of that particular racial group acts like the character illustrated in a movie. It is important to understand that the mammy is not an equal representation of the contributions of African American women.

Some limitations may have hindered the findings. There was a small sample size of African American participants when conducting the survey which limited inferential statistical analysis. Attempts were made to recruit additional participants and thereby allow comparisons with other racial groups. Still, such a small sample limits the power to find statistically significant results. In addition, because students were offered an extra credit incentive there was a possibility of response bias. Future research should examine the scope of why there are still constant media portrayals depicting historical elements of time.

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APPENDIX

Online Survey

The purpose of the study is to examine people's perceptions of mammy depictions in movies. There will be no risks to you participating in the study and no direct benefits to you. Your participation is voluntary and you may drop out at any time.

Are you at least 18 years of age?

Do you watch a lot of movies?

How many movies have you watched in the last two years that depicted African American women as mammies?

A mammy is defined as an overweight, large breasted African American woman. She is often maternal and desexualized. The mammy figure often wears clothes suitable for domestic duties.

List the titles of the movies you have seen with mammy portrayals?

Do you feel negatively impacted by stereotypes depicted in film with mammy characters? I feel...

Do you feel negatively impacted by stereotypes depicted in film with mammy characters? I feel...

Have you seen any Tyler Perry movies depicting mammies?

Have you seen at least 3 Tyler Perry films depicting mammies?

Do you feel positive after watching movies with overweight, African American women?

Have you been negatively affected by mammy depictions in films?

Do you think mammy characters in film affect the way others perceive you?

I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

At times I think I am no good at all.

I am able to do things as well as most other people.

I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

Do you think movies like *Norbit*, *Madea Goes to Jail* and *Big Momma's House* poke fun at African American women?

All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

I certainly feel useless at times.

I wish I could have more respect for myself.

I wish I could have more respect for myself.

Do you feel inspired after watching mammy characters?

I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Have you ever altered your eating habits after viewing movies with mammy depictions?

Have you experienced negative treatment after watching a movie with a mammy depiction?

Do the images in film affect your views about yourself?

I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

Do you think comedic films with mammy portrayals setback African American women?

What is your age?

Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?

What is your sex?

How do you perceive your body type? Check all that apply.

For extra credit purposes only, write your name. This information will not be shared with anyone other than the instructor and will not be connected to your answers.