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Mass Media Created Stereotypes: Influence on Student Learning

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the case of Saudi students at Riversdale State University (a pseudonym) with regard to the influence of the stereotype threat (McGlone & Aronson, 2007) created by TV and newspaper coverage when presenting images of Saudi Arabia, the Arab world, or the Muslim world. The study also aims at revealing the effects that the perception of the aforementioned stereotype can have on the academic success, social integration, and persistence of Saudi students. The research follows the qualitative approach to reveal the human aspects of the case and the degree of intensity that these stereotypes may create. Findings revealed essential information especially with the influx of Saudi students into the United States since 2006. They explained a part of the multifaceted situation specific to the case of Saudi students and showed the importance of awareness among students and college administrators of their situation. The findings also highlighted the importance of the active role of the Saudi students responding to these stereotypes.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Exposed to new values, attitudes, and behavior patterns once in the United States, international students face a culture shock that is usually associated with stress, anxiety, feelings of powerlessness, perceptions of rejection, and consequences of isolation (Rahman & Rollock, 2004). Different cultural barriers constitute the most challenging obstacle towards a comprehensive learning experience for these students. Among these are negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of one's culture which are forms of neo-racism (Lee & Rice, 2007). The U.S. media coverage of world news always has an influence on the American nationals' perceptions of the countries handled. Foreign students are likely to feel frustrated after exposure to U.S. media when handling international news that is related to their countries of origin (Viswanath, 1988). Moreover, mass media can influence impressions of other groups significantly creating and promoting stereotypes when direct information is limited (Fujioka, 1999).

Since April 2006, thousands of students from Saudi Arabia are enrolling on college campuses across the United States under a new rigorous Saudi government scholarship exchange program (Open Doors, 2008). Originating in a society that has relatively different norms and values from those of the United States, Saudi students experience difficulties in their adaptation, acculturation, and satisfaction with their college experience when studying at American colleges and universities (Thani, 1987). A part of these barriers is the stereotypes created by the mass media about Saudi Arabia, Islam, or Arabs. These stereotypes influence American students' perceptions about Saudi students and consequently are reflected in the way they interact with them. They also influence Saudi students and direct their reactions to comments or questions during casual conversations or class discussions (Viswanath, 1988).

Methodology

To reveal the influence of stereotype on Saudi students as a result of depictions of the Muslim World, the Arab World, and Saudi Arabia in the American mass media, the study is an endeavor to answer the research question, how Saudi students describe the impact of the stereotypes created by the mass media on them while pursuing their university degrees at Riversdale State University (RSU). This study followed a qualitative approach utilizing observations, document reviews and semi-structured face to face interviews as the main data source. Selection of participants was based on nominations from college professors who taught Saudi students and university administrators who are involved in programming for international students. The participants included two male students and a female student. First was Malik, a 20 years old male junior majoring in educational technology and accompanied. The second participant was Waseela, a 20 years old veiled female and information technology freshman. Third was Akram, 28 years old male business administration sophomore. The interviews rotated around three main areas: portrayals of Saudi Arabia on TV and newspaper; the influence of these portrayals on the feelings of the research participants; and what they do or think may be the solutions to respond to these negative portrayals. Interview data were transcribed and emailed back to participants for checking. Later, the data were analyzed using Axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) under a list of emergent themes to be able to solidify findings. Member checking was utilized by involving another researcher in the study to verify the objectivity of data analysis.

Findings

Participants' reflections and responses about various kinds of stereotypes created by TV and internet news channels about Saudi Arabia explained different forms of the stereotypes they are facing (Fujioka, 1999). Depiction of Saudi social justice issues was the most disturbing to participants when portrayed on American mass media. Offending Stereotypes included: 1) claimed Saudi discriminatory behaviors against women, 2) claims of injustices and unfair laws effective in Saudi Arabia, and 3) neglecting the cultural achievements of Saudi Arabia as a modernized country. The interviews also revealed the Saudi students' feelings created by these stereotypes as ranging from passive depression to rage and anger (Lee & Rice, 2007). Saudi participants expressed the stress these stereotypes create and the pressure they suffer because of their roles as Saudi students at the university (Viswanath, 1988). Some also expressed how the stereotype threat becomes a problem after an incident appears on TV. Participants' ideas about responding to the challenge of American media created stereotype of Saudi Arabia at RSU offered some insightful applicable ideas. They also explained some of their own initiatives that other Saudi students may follow to deal with these stereotypes. The participants affirmed their active roles in explaining the contextual situation of these stereotypes to their American classmates. They also encouraged presenting about Saudi Arabia in awareness raising sessions that explain to the American students the Saudi point of view that may negate or correct these stereotypes. They also suggested being more proactive in contacting TV channels and internet news channels.

Discussion

The present study had three limitations that restricted its findings: 1) the small sample size of the participants limited the degree of generalization of the findings, 2) timing of the study, in the middle of an era of increased political and military conflicts between America and the Middle East, may have had its influence on the case, and 3) the qualitative approach is very specific to the study participants and cannot be utilized to speak about the whole group of Saudi students (Gall et al., 2005). Future studies may target a larger sample size of Saudi students to produce results that are more generalizable. A quantitative approach may be a suitable technique to study the characteristics of a larger number of Saudi students. A collaborative multi institutional study would reveal valuable findings about the reactions of Saudi students to stereotypes presented on TV and newspapers about Saudi Arabia.

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