An Analysis of Appearance-Based Assumptions in Content Creation

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AN ANALYSIS OF APPEARANCE-BASED ASSUMPTIONS IN CONTENT CREATION

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HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for graduation with April 30th, 2022 Graduation

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Overview

The purpose of this project is to uncover assumptions and stereotypes held against college majors through content creation. Due to the timing of this realization and idea, I was unable to effectively carry out the series I had planned to create. Instead, I found a similar series on YouTube and analyzed what I would have done differently, and what I think worked well in order to produce the final cut. I did pre-production planning for this video, from crew lists to audio and visual equipment I have access to on campus through the Kuhlin Center, home to the School of Media and Communication. This project is completed with sociological explanations from other scholarly articles. All of these things will help me answer my research questions.
Introduction

Growing up, I have always been intrigued by YouTube. I find it fascinating how there can be so much content in such a large range created by people in one place. My favorite type of YouTube videos to watch are web series. A web series is a series of scripted or non-scripted online videos, generally in episodic form, released on the Internet. Since coming to Bowling Green State University and joining the Media Production program, I have always made it a goal in the back of my head to attempt to film the start of a web series that could be showcased on YouTube. I decided this would be a good option for my Honors Project, as I have learned skills throughout my four years that would be able to help me succeed in my endeavor. For a while, I struggled with what I would do. I am very involved on campus and would meet other students in special interest clubs and be surprised to learn of their major, as I would not have expected that. Somedays as my roommate and I were bored, we would sit on campus and “people watch” - meaning we chose a random student on campus and gave them a major, age, name, and life story. As this was never ill-intended, it encouraged me to think about identity, truth, and stereotypes. I thought “this would be a perfect thing to explore further on a web series”. That is what I was attempting to do. The title of the web series video I analyzed in this project was “Match the Major to the Student”.

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc7QiL3G1I&ab_channel=Cut
Research Questions

Is it natural to stereotype and label people? Most may think that is true, while others may believe that is being judgemental. Can others tell what major a student is by first glance, or a brief conversation? Is it the way they dress, their star sign, or political beliefs? These are all examples of stereotypes I believe could influence an assumption. What kind of thoughts go into these stereotypes from a sociological perspective? Do all business students have to be involved in Greek Life? Are all sorority girls blonde? Do all art students dress colorfully? Do these stereotypes influence choosing a major or looking at others who choose specific majors? Can they be harmful? These are examples of questions I am looking to answer in my research.
Literature Review

Along with an analysis of a video from a YouTube series, I was able to pull together some scholarly research to support my project. These sources help me answer my research questions and plan my production effectively. Stereotypes can be harmful because they can encourage discriminatory thoughts against a group of people. It can eliminate an individual’s identity and have negative psychological impacts. Stereotyping can be a natural thing to do, because as humans we like to categorize things.

The Good, the Bad, and the What of Stereotypes

Stereotypical thinking can be very complex. A stereotype is a widely accepted thought or image about something. In regards to students, it could be “Asians are good with numbers” or “Wearing glasses means you are smart”. These may not be true and they may be true depending on the context, and many people use them in their everyday life. “We use stereotypes to simplify our social world and reduce the amount of processing (i.e. thinking) we have to do when meeting a new person by categorising them under a ‘preconceived marker’ of similar attributes, features, or attitudes that we observe” (Prince, 2020). Stereotypes may not be harmful to some, but it is situational.

Distracted by the Unthought – Suppression and Reappraisal of Mind Wandering under Stereotype Threat

This article presents a study in which researchers examined processes underlying stereotype threat effects on the performance of math by women. There was a great emphasis on the role of suppression of mind-wandering in stereotype threat and no threat situations. Stereotype threat is
defined as “socially premised psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies”. This leads to the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about someone’s groups, whether it is racial, ethnic, cultural, or more, which can reduce academic focus and performance. In simple terms, it means people are anxious to confirm a negative stereotype that does fit their social group. “We discuss implications for the understanding of processes underlying stereotype threat effects and the findings of the present work are important in two ways. First, they support the hypothesis that stereotype threat leads to underperformance at least partly due to the suppression of mind wandering. Previous research has shown that people spontaneously suppress stereotype-related thoughts and express anxiety under stereotype threat.” (Kroesbergen, 2015). This could be a possible answer to why individuals are hesitant to label or identify themselves with a stereotype.

Personality Characteristics and Choice of Academic Major: Are Traditional Stereotypes Obsolete?

Another possible answer to my research questions comes from another study in which researchers examined relevant personality characteristics of 899 students majoring in business administration fields. They concluded that the “likelihood that members of any profession can be accurately categorized through simplistic stereotypes is wishful thinking at best”(DuBose, 2010). This supports the idea that it is difficult to guess a person’s college major just by looking at them, or after a brief conversation. While there can be similar characteristics between individuals of the same major, take that with a grain of salt.

College Students' Perceptions of Gender Stereotypes: Making Connections to the Underrepresentation of Women in STEM Fields.
This source contains research from two different United States’ universities. This deals with society’s current stereotypes of male and female personality attributes. The researchers interviewed 499 college students about personality associated with male and female personality attributes and found that there are stereotypical beliefs that vary by gender. The results are concluded to relate to career choice. This helps us better understand how stereotypes can be connected to the absence of popularity of women in many STEM careers.

*The TV Production Studio Handbook*

This book covers everything in the production process from beginning to end. It says “In production it’s essential to be a good problem-solver. In the world of TV things will not always go to plan, actors and contributors will fall down, your favourite camera operator might get another gig, you might not have the budget you want for all the cameras – so what are you going to do about it? You have to find solutions quickly. You have to break down the script and work out the budget and schedule to carefully bring your idea to life.” (Brown, 2016). In relation to my project, this is a perfect mindset I need to have not only for my production but for the overall finalized product. It concludes that you need to plan for the worse so you can expect the best in the end.
Methodology

I found a web series called “Lineup” by Cut media on YouTube that had a very similar vision to me (Figure 1). There was a “Match the Major to the Student” video that the company produced. They had 8 participants with differing college majors: airport management, finance, construction management, mortuary science, creative writing, electrical engineering, structural engineering, and IT for cyber security. There were three people guessing their majors. One was a college professor, one was a blank, and one majored in blank. None were currently enrolled in a university. They filmed each round guesser by guesser. Each guesser was given a list of the participant’s majors. Each round, the guesser would go down the line and talk with each participant. They would ask things like “what does a typical person look like in your major” or “is this major male dominated”. One by one, they were labeled as one of the majors. After the guesser had spoken to everyone, the director asked the participants to raise their hands if they guessed correctly. In the end, 2 out of the 3 guessers labeled 2 out of 8 student participants correctly. The last guesser only labeled one participant with the correct college major, and it was by default as it was the last major on the list and the participant was the last person to be guessed. There was a debrief after the game was completed with each participant. They asked why they were stereotyped the way that they were and what led them to that thought, whether it be physical appearance or something they said. As a viewer, it was difficult to follow who was being guessed correctly and who was labeled with what major. At the end, the discussion was concluded with applause by everyone participating.
My Production

Drawing inspiration from the Cut video, there are a few things I would have done differently if I were able to carry this video out as my own project. Firstly, I would have wanted to focus on common majors in college. The Cut production had a variety of unique majors, which did make it more interesting and difficult to guess. I would have wanted majors such as business, fashion, education, communication, etc. These are very common majors that are easily stereotyped. Business majors are all involved in Greek Life, fashion majors are well dressed, education majors are great speakers, and communication majors wanted an “easy major”. I would have added in more than the amount of majors needed for my own video. For example, if I had 8 participants, instead of having 8 majors, I would have 10. This would be so the last person is not stuck with whatever is left. The majors I would add in would be similar to their real majors so the guessers might be swayed. I also would have had the guessers give the participants signs for whatever major they were being labeled as. From an audience’s perspective, this would have made it easier to follow and allow them to play along with the guesser. As far as editing goes, I would have used a very similar style, where I would edit the three rounds with each guesser person by person. This allows a better flow for the story. I may add graphics in during the one by one discussion that say what the guesser guessed, if they got them correctly, and what their actual major was.

Pre-Production

A typical production is split into three parts: pre-production, production, and post-production. During the pre-production phase, all of the logistics are planned out. This ensures a smooth running production. If I would have done this production, I would have started with scouting a
location. The most accessible location for filming an in-studio production with a decently-sized group of people is in the Kuhlin Center Studio A (Figure 2). It doubles as a classroom for production classes. I would have booked it for a date and time later in the day while classes were not going on around us for privacy. After securing this spot, I would have made a questionnaire form I could post on social media promoting that I need college student participants. The questionnaire would have basic questions to answer about a participant's year in school, major, and stereotypes they think are held against their major. I would make the same for a guesser, and would prefer to have a psychology or sociology guesser, an upperclassman, and someone involved in Greek life for a variety of perspectives. There would have been a ‘YES or NO’ question if they are available for the specific day or time as well, close to the beginning of the form so they are aware of what this is for. I would have added a question saying something along the lines of “I consent to being on camera” so they are aware of what they are getting into as it is not anonymous. A section to fill in contact information would have also been needed. After reviewing responses and selecting the best candidates for the production, I would contact each person via their preferred method of communication and give them more details about location and send a release form for them to sign (Figure 3). I would recruit a crew after making a layout of my shot setup (Figure 4) with my equipment that I am able to rent out (Figure 5). I would tell my guesser the limitations of asking too specific questions. They would not be able to ask questions such as what college the participant’s major is in or what job they can get with their degree. This ensures fairness and does not give too much away.
Conclusion

After planning and analyzing assumptions in content that was created for YouTube, I can draw the following conclusions in response to my research questions: People hold biases and stereotypes without realizing it. Identifying and labeling people is a natural thing to do. Although there was a small pool of people to guess, this shows that it is difficult to guess a student’s college major by first impression. Two of the guessers kept asking similar questions and matching the wrong major to the same person as someone else, which allows the audience to conclude that they have fallen to stereotyping. The production was set up to show how people stereotype and to show if people do or do not, so even though they had fallen into the “trap” of a semi-controlled production, it was still each guesser’s original thoughts and biases showing through their questions and labeling. It is close to impossible to know someone’s major, or even their life based on first impressions. It goes back to the saying “do not judge a book by its cover”.
Takeaways

After viewing my project through a lens of production and through a lens of sociology, I would say that my findings are something for others to be aware of in the future. Although many people know that stereotypes exist, the guessers in the video had come to a realization that they were using stereotypes in their day to day life without thinking. Even if it is just becoming more aware of what is being said or thought, that is something people can look out for in the future; whether it is for themselves or others. It allows the viewer to think critically when these biases come to mind. Stereotypes can shape our own view of ourselves and the world. Just viewing people as the stereotype attached to them does not allow individuality and could eliminate identity. One should make judgements through their own lens and not through society’s.
References


Appendix

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc7QiL3GTIQ&ab_channel=Cut

Figure 1.

Figure 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equipment List for Checkout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Panasonix DVX200s</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Boom Poles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Rode Microphones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 XLR 12ft+ Cables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 SD Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Panasonic Batteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 C-Stands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.