

An Analysis of Stereotypes of Characters in American Films — Taking Three American Films as Examples

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Abstract: With the development of intercultural communication, concepts conveyed in films attract public attention. Using literature review and film analysis, this paper analyzes stereotypes in three American films — *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Zootopia*, and *The Bad Guys* — to answer: How are social groups represented and stereotyped? Positive stereotypes may simplify communication, but negative ones fuel prejudice and hinder interaction. The paper concludes with suggestions for reducing stereotyping and enhancing intercultural competence.

Keywords: stereotypes, character stereotypes, American films, development of intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural communication often falls due to cultural conflicts rooted in historical and socio-economic differences. The rapid development of mass media further amplifies and sometimes distorts these perceptions, reinforcing stereotypes. This paper aims to analyze the role of stereotypes in intercultural communication and their manifestation in American films, improving cross-cultural awareness and communication effectiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies of Stereotype Abroad

Walter Lippman provided the first and earliest definition of stereotypes in the year 1922. According to him, stereotypes were a mean of organizing your images into fixed and simple categories that you used to stand for the entire collection of people.

Allport claims that “a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) out conduct in relation to that category[1]”. Furthermore, Tajfel (1981) put forward the definition that a stereotype was normally considered of as a specific expression of attitudes. It entails an agreement between members of a single group on certain characteristics, which are accepted as a valid, discriminating means of describing the difference of other groups (the outsider).

Stereotypes are learned in a number of ways, according to Samovar (2005), much like culture itself. Initially, parents, family, and friends teach their children stereotypes. People pick up stereotypes from their parents when they hear them say things like “It is too bad that all those Jews are in control of the film industry[5]”. Second, stereotypes develop from insufficient personal interaction. Thirdly, the media promotes a lot of stereotypes.

2.2 Studies of Stereotype at Home

Hu, Wenzhong (1999) believes that stereotype is a relatively fixed, generalized and general view of a certain kind of people or things, which is a quite common phenomenon when people know others. Because stereotype is only the manifestation of individual characteristics in a mass or a culture, its biggest limitation is that it is biased and ignores individual differences[8].

Social stereotype, which refers to holding a set of fixed views on all kinds of people, and taking this as the basis for judging and evaluating their personality. Usually, people have fixed, generalized and general views on a certain kind of people or things in the social environment. For example, some people think that businessmen are greedy for money, teachers are elegant, and actors are affectionate[6].

2.3 Summary

Stereotypes have five basic characteristics--oversimplification, generalization, influence, stubbornness and variability. Once they are formed, stereotypes have certain influence and stubbornness, which can easily lead to communicative misunderstandings and failure.

According to Lippman and Allport, stereotype is a means to organize your image into fixed and simple categories, which you use to represent the whole crowd. This paper is mainly based on the two definitions originally given by Walter to analyze stereotypes in the film.

3. Analysis of Stereotypes in Films

3.1 Causes and Division of Stereotypes

Stereotypes arise from social, educational, and media influences. Social factors include family upbringing, cultural norms, and media portrayals. Individual factors include personality and cognitive style. Together, these elements form and reinforce stereotypes.

Stereotypes can be categorized by target group (e.g., gender, occupation, race, etc) or by origin (e.g., historical prejudice, cultural centrism, media distortion, etc). This paper focuses on gender, professional, and social stereotypes.

3.2 Taking “Crazy Rich Asians” as an Example

This film contrasts Eastern and Western values through the relationship between Rachel Chu and Nick Young.

3.2.1 The Stereotype that Chinese Women Do Not Need to Work (Historical Prejudice)

The hero's mother has always been influenced by traditional Eastern values. She is traditional, devoted to husband, loyal to family, and even though she is highly educated. Her family status is given by husband, and she is deeply proud of this. The North American perception that Chinese women are proud of being a housewife and that “it is a privilege” is a typical stereotype of them. Nowadays, Chinese women's choice is to work, but the solidified image of them in the West has not changed with the times.

3.2.2 The Stereotype of the Dislocated Fatherhood (Historical Prejudice)

The role of ‘father’ never appears, but other characters become the embodiment of that role, and westerners have an inherent impression of the absence of the status role of the Eastern family. On a cultural level, the inherent dislocation of the Chinese ‘father’ from Western representation has become an established expression that Western audiences are familiar with and accustomed to accepting.

3.2.3 The Stereotype that the Hero Does Not Talk about His Parents because They Are Poor

In the film, Rachel says that every time Yang Nick parents are mentioned, he changes the subject. She guesses that change is because his parents are poor and he has to pay them money every month. This subjective stereotype also reinforces the viewers' stereotype that Chinese people do not talk about their parents because they are “poor”. Perhaps the stereotype that China is still undeveloped in their eyes is the result of historical prejudice[7].

The film is ostensibly about the differences in cultural values in different humanistic backgrounds, but inside it profoundly emphasizes the deep-rooted cultural centrism, the sense of superiority of local culture and the fullness of stereotypes in the creation of Western films. Exploiting the information gap between China and the West, the film further exacerbate the stereotypical image of Chinese society among the Western public.

3.3 Taking “Zootopia” as an Example

Zootopia tells the story of Judy who is a rabbit and Nick who is a fox, they work together to solve crimes to defy stereotypes.

3.3.1 The Stereotype that Rabbits Cannot Be Policemen (Gender Stereotypes and Professional Stereotypes)

Judy has aspired to become a policewoman since she was a child. In Eastern culture, there is “as timid as a mouse”, so “as timid as a rabbit” has become the stigma attached to rabbits in Western culture[4].

Scene 1: Judy arrives at the Police Academy with great confidence, but she is mocked by the stereotype--“rabbits cannot be policemen”. At the start of training, Judy is taunted by the animals as a “cutie” (meaning small and timid) because she is small and stands in many huge carnivores, and her trainer sarcastically tells her to “stop trying” and “give up”.

The stereotypes that surround Judy is the result of society's stereotype that rabbits are too timid to become police officers.

3.3.2 Stereotypes of Other Characters

Character1 Gangster (Mr. Big)--professional stereotype: The villain is a shrew mouse and a small man, rather than a gangster with the ability and presence that audiences perceive him to have. He is a homage to the shrew version of the film, The Godfather, also dressed in a black suit with a red flower adorning, a slicked-back hair, a large diamond ring on his hand and many strong polar bears acting as bodyguards behind him.

Character2 Officer Cheetah--gender stereotype: Officer Cheetah, who always makes feminine gestures and has an

obese body, which is far from the viewer's image of a nimble and athletic cheetah. The question that arises within the viewer is: when a role makes a feminine gesture or action, is that role necessarily a female character?

3.4 Taking "The Bad Guys" as an Example

This film create five easily recognizable iconic characters, namely the Big, Bad Wolf, Mr.Snake, Ms.Tarantula (Webs), Mr.Shark and Mr.Piranha.

3.4.1 The Stereotype that Wolves Are Brutal and Cunning

Scene 1: In the film, the Big, Bad Wolf has a clear self-concept, saying, "I'm the villain of every story, guilty until proven innocent, and even if by some miracle we did change, who's gonna believe us." (dialogue from the movie) This scene shows that the Big, Bad Wolf suffers from the stereotypes inherent of others about him.

The above scene certainly reveal the stereotypes of the Big, Bad Wolf. And facing the fear of the audience or others, also in the fairytale world, he does not feel fresh. Obviously, stereotypes have an impact not only on those who create them, but also on those who suffer from them.

3.4.2 The Stereotype that Villains Should Be Tall and Powerful

Scene 1: The old lady, the Golden Dolphin, the good training, all of them is planned by Professor Marmalade, just to steal the meteorite, in order to make the Bad Guys take the blame. When the Bad Guys asked why chose them as patsies. He said, "because they are the perfect patsies, when people look up 'bad' in the dictionary, they do not see a sweet, adorable guinea pigs, they see you. And they always will." (dialogue from the movie)

As the play progresses, the audience gradually realize that Professor Marmalade does not seem to be as perfect as he has been presented. The herbivore is soft and kind by nature, but becomes the mastermind behind the scenes.

3.4.3 The Stereotype that only Men Can Be Policemen, Politicians and the Founder of the Information Age

Female character 1: Ms.Tarantula is the technical support of the Bad Guys.

Female character 2: With towering figure and exceptional mobility, the Female Police Chief whisks the protagonist and his mates into a frenzy of fear and flight.

Female character 3: Diane Fox (Crimson Paw) has a dual identity--the governor of the state, and a master thief with a mythical legend of invincibility.

Carli, L.L., Alawa, L., Lee, Y., Zhao, B., and Kim, E.(2016) stated: Women may be at a disadvantage in science because people hold different stereotypes about women than they do about men and successful scientists, particularly in scientific fields where women are less prevalent[2].

The best performance of female characters is actually an externalization of the awakening of female consciousness. When women are confronted with gender-based oppression and bullying, they choose not to suffer in silence but to stand up and fight it.

4. Conclusion

Stereotypes in films like Crazy Rich Asians often perpetuate outdated and inaccurate views of cultures, while films like Zootopia and The Bad Guys encourage critical reflection and breaking stereotypes. Negative stereotypes can lead to prejudice and communication failures, whereas awareness and open-mindedness can foster better intercultural understanding. According to Fiske (2017): "To change stereotypes requires understanding their commonalities and differences, their origins and patterns across cultures[3]."

To reduce stereotyping:

(1) The National level: Enhance country's cultural soft power, provide more opportunities for Chinese culture to enter the global stage, and support youth-oriented cultural exports.

(2) The Personal Level: Recognize stereotypes, engage in controlled thinking, increase cultural confidence, expand cross-cultural contacts, and use social media to share authentic cultural narratives.

By understanding the definition and characteristics of stereotypes, we have come to realize that stereotypes are fluid and we should take active steps to address them rather than ignore them. Finally, we need to use stereotypes wisely to make them an effective tool for perceiving others and reflecting on ourselves, and to treat them correctly to achieve successful communication.

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