

# Popular Culture & Globalization

## Teacher Candidates' Attitudes & Perceptions of Cultural & Ethnic Stereotypes

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### Introduction

In order to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to live and work in an interconnected and interdependent world, it is essential they have teachers who understand global processes and can employ a global perspective in the classroom. While globalization can lead to expanded economic markets, increased mass communication, and reduced border restrictions, globalization has also been associated with tensions between those who benefit from global processes and those who are victims of the abuses associated with globalization (human trafficking, poverty, environmental issues, etc.).

Given the inequalities which exist along racial, ethnic, and class lines, stressing these concepts as part of larger social, political, and economic forces is important for developing a human rights-based approach for education, which advocates inclusion, equal opportunities, and non-discrimination. In an effort to expose teacher candidates to the manner in which global inequalities transcend national borders, I use a series of international advertisements to highlight the manner in which concepts such as race, ethnicity, power, and privilege are promoted and perpetuated through the media in different areas of the world.

Drawing on historic ideologies of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the disparities and xenophobia associated with globalization, these examples depict how contemporary globalization perpetuates discourses of racial and ethnic inferiority.

### Motivation for Study

The motivation for this study grew out of a college-wide effort at my institution

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to prepare teacher education candidates with a more global perspective. Like most universities (Knight, 2003), my university is attempting to increase the opportunities and activities related to global and international initiatives. Since teacher education candidates study abroad in lesser numbers than their peers in other fields (Open Doors, 2013) and the number of international students in undergraduate teacher education programs is limited, one way to increase global awareness is through course related activities and assignments.

As such, I redesigned an Introduction to Secondary Education course to focus on global engagement. The goals of the course are to expose teacher candidates to a wide-range of issues in secondary education. Topics include an introduction to the teaching profession, issues of reform, and current trends in public education. Two additional goals include (1) the impact that categories of diversity (racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, ability, and student development) have on teaching and learning and (2) the manner in which schools shape and are shaped by society and community.

With a focus on global engagement, the scope of the course changed to explore these concepts more broadly including the impact of global issues, interconnectedness, and the legacy of imperialism on children and education.

Teaching about issues related to globalization should be an important component of teacher preparation. While we have always lived in a diverse world, globalization has increased the demands and realities of diversity, presenting new challenges related to infrastructure, resource allocation, and social stratification. At the same time they also create new spaces and challenges, especially in education, for issues related to bilingual education, multiculturalism, and academic achievement. As such, it is important that teacher education candidates

understand these implications and the manner in which they can impact their classroom.

Teaching about issues related to globalization is also important from a social justice perspective (Parker, 2008). While Western nations such as the United States maintain a strong commitment to democracy and equality, the reality is significant inequalities exist along racial, ethnic, and class lines.

### Theoretical Perspective

I used both Critical Global Education (CGE) and Critical Media Literacy as theoretical frameworks for this study. Efforts to include global perspectives or global education in teacher education have evolved over the last fifty years to reflect the political and economic influences at the time. While there is no single agreed upon definition of global education (Kirkwood, 2001), scholars have proposed global education should include a number of concepts such as: multiple perspectives, knowledge of other cultures, global challenges, interconnectedness, concerns for peace and development, the legacies of imperialism, and cross-cultural experiences (Kirkwood, 2001; Lamy, 1987; Merryfield 1997).

While some have criticized the global education movement as being associated with anti-capitalism and efforts to indoctrinate teachers (Schafly, 1986) and students, others have criticized global education as only associating the "rest" of the world insofar as it affects the United States (O'Conner & Zeichner, 2011; Sleeter, 2003). As such, O'Conner and Zeichner (2011) expand upon "mainstream" global education to include CGE, which they define as "an approach to global education that seeks to educate students about the causes and consequences of global injustices that aims to support students to work in solidarity within the worlds' people toward transformative change" (p. 523). Essential to CGE is a discussion of not only the economic and

power imbalances between and among nations, but also within nations to explore the link between these issues in both global and local contexts.

In our media rich culture individuals are inundated with visual images. Television serves as one of the major influences on our visual culture. Since media has the potential to influence how we construct images and understand the world (Kellner & Share, 2005), advocates of critical media literacy argue that exploring the manner in which the media constructs images and messages is also important. Deconstructing these images and messages is an essential step in addressing inequity and oppression based on race, class, gender, etc. (Kellner & Share, 2005; Morrell, 2002).

### Multi-Media and Popular Culture

There is a growing body of literature that suggests aspects of popular culture, specifically mass media, have the potential to shape individuals' attitudes regarding issues such as race (Graves, 1999; Joanou & Griffin, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2005). Given the potential impact of popular culture to affect and shape how individuals develop ethnic and cultural stereotypes, researchers have suggested using examples

from popular culture as an effective pedagogical tool in classroom settings.

For example Joanou and Griffin (2010) found using images from popular media an effective way to facilitate classroom discussions regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality among mainly White teacher candidates. Scanian and Feinberg (2000) have used the television show *The Simpsons* to engage undergraduate students in a number of sociological concepts such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and socioeconomic status. Similarly, Melander and Wortmann (2011) discuss their success in using short clips of the television series *Desperate Housewives* to illustrate gender stereotypes in a large sociology course. They found this approach to be successful in engaging students and improving student scores on later assessments.

While a number of concepts would be included within these critical theories (gender, age, sexual orientation), the focus on this classroom activity was limited to race, ethnicity, power, and privilege. That is not to underscore other concepts, however focusing on this one concept allowed for a richer discussion of the topic. The specific research questions were:

1. How do American teacher candi-

dates interpret potentially negative images related to race, ethnicity, power, and privilege in popular culture?

2. How do American teacher candidates conceptualize these concepts from a non-US context?

3. How do teacher candidates interpret these messages as a function of how dominant culture perceives "others?"

### Methodology

#### Participants and Procedure

Participants viewed eight advertisements from different parts of the world to explore messages of race, ethnicity, power, and privilege (see Table 1). Given the strong rationale for using examples of American popular culture to explore issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender with college students, why use examples from other countries and cultures and not add to the existing literature with different examples from American popular culture? On one hand using global examples offers individuals, who might be otherwise resistant to acknowledging the presence of negative stereotypes, a "safe" place as a cultural outsider to engage in meaningful

**TABLE 1**  
CLASSROOM ADVERTISEMENTS

Product	Product Information	Example used in class*
Burger King Mexican Whopper	2009 Burger King ad that features a wrestler wearing a Mexican flag. The ad was run in Europe and drew criticism from European and Mexican officials (Associated Press, 2009).	Deebootube, 2009
Dunkin' Donuts charcoal donuts	2013 campaign featuring a woman in "blackface." The ad was run in Thailand after protests from human rights groups (Gecker, 2013).	Gecker, 2013
Banania chocolate drink	French chocolate / banana drink popular in France since the product inception in the early 20th century. The company packaging (which has evolved over the last 100 years) has been labeled as racist and portraying colonial sentiments (referring to France's colonial past in Senegal) (Blume, 2006; Traub, 2006).	Blume, 2006; Machin, 2013; Traub, 2006
Black herbal toothpaste	Herbal toothpaste popular in Thailand.	Ming76, 2006
Negrita Rum	A French wine and spirits company that dates to the mid-19th century. Numerous ads feature colonial images of Black women. Historic images feature Black women as servants (Traub, 2006).	Negrita-Bardinet, 2012; Traub, 2006
KyoChon Fried Chicken advertisement	2009 campaign by Korean KyoChon chicken restaurant chain (Glover, 2010).	Glover, 2010; Oneabjure, 2009
European Union viral video	2012 ad produced by the European Commission. The ad features a White woman in a seemingly threatening environment by men of various ethnic backgrounds. The video was criticized by a number of entities and removed by the European Commission (Watt, 2012).	Watt, 2012
Candy wrapper images from Cloetta Fazer company	Nordic candy company in existence since mid-19th century. Images included several candy wrappers noting negative stereotypes (Helsingin Sanomat, 2008; Waterfield, 2011).	Helsingin Sanomat, 2008; Waterfield, 2011

\*All images were obtained from noted websites and news articles. Full citations are noted in the reference section.

discourse without feeling a sense shame or “White-guilt.”

Global examples also highlight the manner in which these issues manifest themselves in different parts of the world and provide teacher candidates the opportunity to problematize these issues leading to greater global awareness and social action. Since they are short, commercials and other advertisements can be an efficient way to engage in multiple examples and representations in a single class. As their main purpose is to “sell” a product, these messages allow participants to explore these concepts as a function of our consumer based society as well as the discourses regarding dominant culture.

In the weeks prior to this activity, classroom readings and discussions focused on basic principles of multicultural education with a focus on critical multiculturalism. This material provided participants with some framework for exploring the advertisements noted below. Participants ( $n=44$ ) were all teacher education candidates pursuing secondary or K-12 (Music, Art, Dance, PE, Modern Language) certification and enrolled in the professional education sequence for those majors. Only two participants enrolled in the course identify as being not White (one participant of Indian-American descent and the other identified as being Latina).

Participants were given a sheet noting each of the advertisements/images by title only and asked, after viewing to note their initial thoughts regarding the (1) purpose of the advertisement, (2) intent of the advertiser in selecting the specific image or theme, and (3) overall reaction to the advertisement. I provided brief contextual information for each example, however, since the goal of the activity was to elicit as authentic responses from participants as possible, there was no discussion during the activity so as to not influence reactions.

Participants viewed the advertisements, completed the information sheet, and turned it in anonymously. Following the classroom activity, participants were asked to complete a reflection based on their thoughts on the advertisements as a whole, how these advertisements would be perceived in the United States, and how images like these in popular culture could potentially impact children in schools. The following two class meetings were devoted to class debriefs regarding the activity.

For purposes of clarity, all commercials, images, and advertisements are referred to as “advertisements.” Each of the selected

advertisements was either removed by the company following customer complaints or noted (most by a human rights or humanitarian groups) as portraying negative ethnic or cultural stereotypes. The choice of advertisements was somewhat necessitated by language gaps. In order for the English-speaking participants to have at least a basic level of understanding of the advertisement, the actual product being “marketed” needed to be obvious, therefore using advertisements where products were easily recognized was important. While the products themselves were obvious to participants, as noted below, the messages and marketing strategies were not as easily understood.

### **Collection and Analysis**

All participant responses were transcribed exactly as written by participants. Once all responses were transcribed, I began a process of coding individual responses. Responses were analyzed as a whole rather than analyzed based on each individual advertisement. This allowed me to look at the entire set of responses collectively to gain a more complete picture of participants’ perceptions and understandings of the concept rather than as a function of their interpretations of individual advertisements. After reviewing the data in an open and holistic manner, I began using open coding to build concepts around recurrent themes, followed by axial coding to reduce and re-classify thematic codes in a manner that reflected the connections between categories and subcategories. I then used selective coding to look at the data as it directly related to the research questions.

The following four themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) identifying racism and the cultural context in which advertisement was used, (2) post-colonial and ethnocentric interpretation, (3) implications for classroom interactions, and (4) privileging American policies toward discrimination and social justice. A discussion of each thematic category with supporting textual evidence from participants is provided below.

### **Results**

Across each theme participants noted varying levels of sophistication when discussing issues of race, ethnicity, privilege, and power. It is difficult to categorize participants’ responses as “negative” or “positive” so I have intentionally stayed away from those distinct, value-laden categories.

Instead, I discuss participant responses as part of the overall theme.

Additionally, it is important to note the purpose of this activity was to explore the manner in which individuals were situated in the sample ads and what possible stereotypes these messages can perpetuate rather than classifying areas of the world as being more or less culturally sensitive.

### **Identifying Racism and its Cultural Context**

While racism is culturally negotiated, the construct of racism in terms of discrimination, marginalization, and related intolerance is not. As such, an essential goal in the course was to explore the construct of racism (and ethnic discrimination) as being one that transcends national borders, not bound by unique national definitions or interpretations. Based on participant responses it was clear there was a great deal of variability in the extent to which participants understood race, and therefore racism as a concept.

In some instances participants reported they felt there was some cultural context needed to determine the extent to which the advertisement depicted negative stereotypes or suggested that these concepts were culturally constructed. As one participant noted, “their cultures are different and are more or less offended by different stereotypes.” Another participant offered, “This could be offensive, but their culture is different so it may be ok,” while another participant said, “The idea that jumped out to me from these is that the ads were caricatures of Black people. But there are some problems with White people too. It’s just what we get offended by.”

Just as classroom interactions can be contextually based, cultural context and cultural difference were important aspects of this activity. In follow-up classes we discussed the assertion by the Thai CEO of Dunkin’ Donuts that objection to their campaign was an American interpretation of racism (Gecker, 2013). This provided participants a different interpretation of the manner in which audiences might perceive images (this article also provides context for the Thai toothpaste ad also used in the class activity). While it’s important to acknowledge a line between cultural difference and racism, the proverbial “line” became a key point in the debrief sessions. Participants struggled with the extent to which some of the images were simply a product of cultural differences or if in fact the perceived manner of inferiority,

servitude, or exaggeration made them potentially offensive.

Many students noted they simply did not understand why or how advertisements were problematic. For some advertisements students simply noted: "I don't get it," or (referring to Black people being used to represent chocolate), "I just don't get why a dark person is associated with chocolate," or "I wouldn't have noticed it (racist connotations) if the racism wasn't pointed out."

In other cases participants noted they didn't find particular images to promote negative images. This was particularly disturbing when participants specifically noted the ad promoted negative stereotypes, but still said, "I didn't initially find anything wrong with the commercial" or another participant who noted (referring to the Negrita Rum ad), "I don't understand this (being racist) other than the Black woman being like a servant."

An overall observation was the fact that many participants did not seem to understand the social and cultural connotations of Blackface. This gap in cultural knowledge prompted a lengthy discussion in the following days regarding this historical context of minstrel portrayal of African-American stereotypes in the mid/late 19th century. Conversely, many students noted examples of negative stereotypes, which could perpetuate and promote racist feelings. As one participant wrote, (referring to the Thai herbal toothpaste ad), "This is the most offensive thing I have ever seen!" Other participants specifically pointed to the attempts of advertisers to construct ethnic images through mockery or the exaggeration of physical features made the images offensive on their own, regardless of how they were situated in the advertisement.

#### **Post-Colonial and Ethnocentric Interpretation**

The manner in which many participants discussed the individuals and products in the advertisements often reflected a post-colonial or ethnocentric perspective. Post-colonial theory brings into question the manner in which cultural perceptions have been shaped and exploited by the way in which the "colonizers" have portrayed the colonized." In his work, *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said conceptualizes this representation as one in which the West is characterized as "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical ...[and] without natural suspicion" (pp. 3-5) whereas Easterners

(including those from Asia and Africa) are depicted as "irrational, degenerate, primitive, mystical, and suspicious" (p. 49). The construction of these cultural stereotypes, Said claims, ultimately has created an "us" and "them" binary.

In some instances participants noted images perpetuated negative stereotypes, but contextualized this information as a function of the origin of the company. For example when viewing images for Negrita Rum or Banania, one participant noted, "The images aren't good, but they began at a time when that is how people thought Africans looked so it makes sense [that they are still used]." This justification was particularly disturbing as it is largely consistent with the assumptions of racial inferiority that were historically used to justify imperialism and discrimination. In this case the participant did not make the connection that the advertisements, even from a historical perspective, perpetuated these assumptions.

In some cases the manner in which the participants discussed the individuals depicted in the ads represented an ethnocentric notion of race and class. For example, one participant noted, "[this is] racism toward African Americans" while another participant said, "African Americans appear [to be] stereotyped." In the debrief sessions a few days later in class, I summarized some of the responses and asked participants to think for a moment if a Black man in Thailand was African American? For a few participants this was a defining moment in both the activity and their understanding of race.

In the final reflection paper, a participant wrote, "I had never thought about the fact that not everyone who is Black is African American. The reality is I don't know where this man is from, maybe Thailand, maybe somewhere else, but in any case my response was most certainly from the point of view of an American." Throughout this class activity and follow-up discussions it became clear that there was an overall lack of knowledge related to post-colonial legacies throughout the world.

Similarly, there was a lack of understanding regarding the manner in which mainstream media reinforces existing power structures regarding who belongs and who doesn't in a given culture as well as the socially acceptable manner in which each group should be depicted. Later conversations focused on the various push-pull factors affecting immigration and asylum seeking that transcend simply the movement of people from one location to other.

#### **Implications for Classroom Interactions**

Following the classroom activity, participants were asked to reflect on the potential impact messages such as those conveyed in the advertisements may have on classroom interactions. Understanding the role that ethnic and cultural stereotypes may play in world events or human interactions, especially for children, is important to understand these issues beyond a national context.

While some participants noted they did not find individual advertisements offensive or perpetuating negative stereotypes, overwhelmingly they noted that when messages did reflect negative ethnic and cultural stereotypes, those advertisements could have a detrimental effect in a classroom setting. Participants noted negative messages were of particular concern for children as their "brains soak up everything they see and hear...if they continually see the same social norms, stereotypes and prejudice things, it will eventually become engrained in their way of thinking for a long time, if not the rest of their lives."

A large majority of comments from participants regarding classroom implications related to bullying or student conflict issues. In some cases participants felt students may feel justified to pick on other students because they "might start to think this is an appropriate way to act." As such many participants noted they felt a sense of responsibility with regard to negating these messages. To that end, one participant said, "it would then be my job to try and open their mind and teach them that stereotypes were not realistic portrayals of individuals." Another added, "It is my job not to let stereotypes take over [classroom] interactions."

While participants did acknowledge these messages could adversely affect students, and many felt as teachers it was their job to provide different messages and make sure their students felt safe and in a "welcoming environment," only one participant made specific reference to the existing power structure in place with regard to popular culture. The participant noted:

From what I know of advertisements, they have researchers (presumably with sociological backgrounds) who get paid to discover the most effective method of selling a product to a target audience. Their expertise examines the values and assumptions that we ALREADY have and in turn create commercials to convince us to buy things. I believe it is safe to assume that the creation of these advertisements

accurately reflect the majority view of the population.

With this one exception it appears participants may still not understand the role of social institutions in promoting and perpetuating existing cultural hegemony.

### Privileging American Policies

An important part of the research process was to ask participants how they thought the advertisements would be interpreted in the United States. Almost overwhelmingly participants responded that the advertisements used in the class activity would not be accepted in America and would cause outrage among Americans. When asked why, students commented, “[The ads] would probably be more controversial in the U.S.” and “I feel that [other countries] are more racist than the U.S. [The ads] wouldn’t last long [here].”

A few participants commented they didn’t understand the habit of using people to advertise food and maintained that “those commercials would fly in the U.S.” because we use things like cartoons-like characters to advertise things like cereal.” As I explained the need to use many food advertisements in the activity due to language issues, I asked participants again to think about the manner in which they saw products advertised on packages, television, or in print media.

A student quickly countered the earlier participant’s comment that American products were not offensive and pointed out campaign ads such as Aunt Jemima syrup and Uncle Ben’s rice. The fact that many participants needed to be reminded of these American examples highlight the manner in which these images can become such a part of our culture we don’t think about them and the potential messages they send.

### Discussion

Discussion of race and issues of diversity are not easy conversations for most people. Having these conversations with young people, particularly when they have limited experience with individuals of diverse backgrounds, is especially difficult. Confronting concepts such as race, ethnicity, class, power, and privilege with individuals who, by virtue of being from predominately White, middle to upper middle class, suburban backgrounds, have largely benefited from these constructs, compounds this challenge.

This activity then in some ways was enlightening, yet frustrating, for

participants. At the same time, it left a few participants searching for answers regarding how to “fix” what they perceived to be problems in the world. This desire to “fix” a problem led to a conversation in class in which a participant asked, “So, I think some of these ads could be seen as racist, but I mean, where does it end? So, if someone of color is eating a [chocolate] cookie, I mean is that always racist?”

This was an important moment in the class activity as participants wrestled with the manner in which products were positioned, the intent of the advertiser, and the ultimate message conveyed to consumers. It was also an important moment for participants to explore the extent to which they had previously ignored subtle messages they now thought could be potentially offensive.

As the class discussed these issues in greater detail another participant offered, “I don’t think someone of color eating a chocolate cookie is bad, but you have to look at the whole picture.” The class discussion then turned to a mini-framework for analyzing advertisements (and other aspects of popular culture) for aspects of bias and potential marginalizing messages. Aspects of their framework included exaggerated physical features, mockery, “Othering,” and perpetuating negative stereotypes (ethnic, cultural, gender).

This highlights a challenge with this type of activity and discussion: the potential for students to develop a classification or “list” of actions that would be deemed acceptable and those that would be unacceptable.

For example, a few students noted they felt “guilty” for eating at particular restaurants or buying product that were used as examples in class. In other words, because Dunkin’ Donuts used an ad with Blackface, boycotting the company constitutes “good behavior” while supporting the company would be deemed “bad” behavior.”

This framework itself, while showing an aspect of critical thinking and perhaps social action among participants, was still somewhat frustrating. Concepts such as these are complex and narrowing them to a framework or list of what is “good” and what is “bad” is much too simplistic.

However I feel the urgency on the part of participants to classify things as good and bad or right and wrong is in line with previous research on aspects of White-guilt and White-privilege (McIntosh, 1990; Sleeter, 1993; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Conversely, other participants dismissed the discussion as an over-

analysis or an attempt to “make too much out of nothing.” As one participant noted, “It’s just a commercial. It’s not that big of a deal.” Again, these dismissive attitudes and responses are inline with Warren and Hytten’s (2004) work related to “faces of Whiteness.”

### Conclusion

For many of the participants in this study, this was the beginning of their exploration into these discussions. While the purpose of this exercise was to allow participants the opportunity to engage in these issues from a non-U.S. perspective, the discussion led to a much richer and critical discussion of similar advertisements in American popular culture than in previous semesters. A number of students noted later that the discussion regarding global ads helped them to see subtle messages they would have not previously noted when viewing the American advertisements. This also led to participants offering new examples they encountered (television, commercials, music, etc.) which may reinforce negative stereotypes.

The relatively small, homogenous participant sample size limits the ability to generalize the findings to all teacher candidates. Similarly, few participants had experiences outside the United States or with large numbers of individuals from countries or cultures different than their own. Their ability then to see beyond a U.S. perspective was therefore quite limited. It is also important to note the aspect of cultural difference when attempting to interpret images or messages as a cultural outsider. One still makes assumptions based on one’s own culture and making assumptions of understanding intent of another culture can result in just similar negative stereotypes.

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