

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Black History Month is one of the most celebrated events in United States. Black History Month is a yearly celebration for African Americans achievements as well as a period of time in order to recognizing African American's central role in US history. It began in September 1915, when Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) was founded by Carter G. Woodson and Jesse E. Moorland. This organization is devoted in terms of researching and promoting African American's, as well as people with African descent, achievements. Later in 1926, the organization sponsored a Negro History Week in the second week of February. That specific time was chosen in honor of the birthday of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas (Britannica 2014).

Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas are considered as prominent figures in African American history, therefore their birthdays are chosen as an honor. Lincoln proposed the idea and signed the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution to abolish slavery (Foner 2010) while Douglas was a social reformer and abolitionist. Not only he escaped slavery, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement (Gatewood Jr 1981, Britannica 2014).

United States of America has one of the most complex cultural identities. The blending of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities in America led to the US becoming referred to as a “melting pot”. “Melting pot” gives an idealistic vision of the American society and identity (Alba and Nee 2003). In addition to that, according to a 2019 survey, over half of Americans (64%) say the fact that American population is composed of people of different races and ethnicities has a positive impact on the culture of the country. (J. M. Horowitz 2019).

However, according to a 2019 study, the position of African American people in America is highly impacted by the legacy of slavery 150 years ago. 78% of African Americans say the country has not made substantial progress toward racial equality. In addition to that, about six out of ten African American say that being black resulted in being treated less fairly in life compared to white people. Contrary, whites have the tendency to say that blacks and whites are treated fairly (Horowitz, Brown and Cox 2019).

The injustice regarding treatment towards African American people can also be seen clearly in US media. Media are important because it acts as African Americans source of representation and its portrayals contribute to African Americans’ public perceptions (Davis and Gandy 1999, Gray 1989, Matabane 1988, Wilson, Gutierrez and Chao 2003). In a 2000 study, it is found that the media portrays African Americans as acting out and behaving in unflattering ways (Tamborini, et al. 2000). Portrayals of blackness in mainstream media present range of opportunities and limitations, especially regarding Black identity representation and performance (Bogle 2001, Smith-Shomade 2002).

It is found that African Americans are often portrayed in stereotypical work roles with negative traits and characterize as low achievers. They are rarely portrayed as having a recognizable occupation because their roles are usually as person with blue-collar occupations. Their portrayal also have the tendency to be rebellious, disrespectful, immoral, uneducated and noisy (Punyanunt-Carter 2008). These stereotypical associations have already been internalized in the audiences' minds due to the representation made by mainstream media (Bird 1996, Martindale 1996).

Stereotyping can be solved by increasing the variety of images and display used to describe a particular group or identity (Day 2018). This enlarged representation "expands the racial representations range and the complexity of what it means to 'be black, thus challenging earlier stereotypes reductionism" (Hall 1997). As the time goes, the diversity of African American portrayals has increased in media. However, this creates a new issue since Internet is a larger realm to produce and access these portrayals.

With a literacy rate reaching 97 percent, United States consumes massive amounts of media in all forms (Advameg 2019). On average, U.S. adults are spending over 11 hours a day connected to linear and digital media and almost six hours a day with video alone. Interestingly, it is found that over half of content consumption happens in third-party environments like Facebook and YouTube (Company 2018). YouTube allows its content creators to produce characters which portray identity variety formations, resulting in an increase of representation. Thus, YouTube is seen as a new type of media alternative because

it provides a platform for communities that are ignored by mainstream media (Raghavan 2009).

Although YouTube gives a chance to these ignored communities, the same racial stereotypes found in mainstream media is also popular in YouTube. YouTube reproduces racial hierarchies and caters to race representation as well as stereotypes for entertainment rather than power contestation (Guo and Harlow 2014). These online streaming platforms offer more diversity than traditional television although underrepresented and misrepresent (Jr. Weaver 2016). On average, it is found that the images quality of African Americans images has not increased although the quantity has increased (Weigel, Kim and Frost 1995, Greenberg, Mastro and Brand 2002, Mastro and Tropp 2004).

According to a survey, three quarters of Americans feel that it is important for a company to promote racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace (J. M. Horowitz 2019). With the help from Freedom of Information Act, this led up to the first diversity report to come out in 2013. In 2019, according to data from the American Society of News Editors, *BuzzFeed* has one of the most diverse newsrooms. From the annual diversity reports, compared to Netflix, Facebook, Vox, Google, and Pinterest, *BuzzFeed* have a higher share of women in leadership, Latinx or Hispanic US employees, women in tech compared to all and African American US Leadership with quite the same amount as Netflix. Through employee feedback, it is shown that *BuzzFeed* employees of all ethnicities and gender identities feel like they can assume an identity of their choosing. At first,

88% of all *BuzzFeed*'s employees agreed and now that number has increased to 93% (Peretti 2019).

BuzzFeed is an American company that works on internet, news and entertainment media with a focus on digital media. Ever since it was founded in 2006 by Jonah Peretti and John S. Johnson III, it has focused on monitoring viral content. Although it was first well-known as online questionnaires, "lists" and pop culture articles, *BuzzFeed* has become a global technology and media company reporting on various topics such as politics, business, DIY and animals. *BuzzFeed* produces daily content that presents the work of reporters, syndicated artists, communities and employees (BuzzFeed 2019).

BuzzfeedVideo is *Buzzfeed* Motion Picture's flagship YouTube channel. This channel provides original content, with the team and production studio based in Los Angeles. By mid-February 2020, *BuzzfeedVideo* had more than 16 billion views with almost 20 million subscribers and posted over than 16.6 thousand videos. *BuzzFeedVideo* created many original series in its YouTube channel, such as *Worth It*, *Night In/Night Out* and *Mom in Progress* (BuzzFeedVideo 2019). Not only original series, *BuzzFeedVideo* also creates themed contents, and make playlists of such contents, one of the playlist is *Black History Month*.

Black History Month, as the name suggests, features and consists of videos regarding the celebration and commemoration of African-Americans achievements and history. The videos in the playlist are meant to be made in line with the celebration of Black History Month in United States. The videos created are made by the company's Employee Resource Group (ERG). *BuzzFeed*ERGs,

led by employee volunteers with different focuses on many affinities, contributing to company in many ways including hosting celebrations and events such as Black History Month (Peretti 2019).

In that sense, the whole videos in the playlist is supposedly containing videos regarding African-American history and achievements. However, the writer argues that not all of the videos are about their history and achievements. Some of the videos are not even made on the Black History Month. It is found that only 20 videos (out of 59 listed in the playlist) are uploaded during the Black History Month in America, making it 33.8% of the population.

In a playlist that supposedly functions as a celebration to African-Americans, it is also found that there are some inconsistencies of their representation. For example, *12 Beauty Struggles Black Women Know Too Well* compared with *4 Inspiring Firsts from Black Women*. One of the videos mentioned above actually has something to do with African-American achievements and/or history, promoting the pride of being black, while the other does not. For instance, In *4 Inspiring Firsts from Black Women*, we can see the African-American Women representation as inspiring and powerful while in *12 Beauty Struggles Black Women Know Too Well*, African-American women are seen as just like any other women of color who struggles with beauty-related stuff. These inconsistencies found in the representation of African-Americans are worth mentioning, especially in a media company as diverse such as *BuzzFeed*.

While studies on YouTube have grown rapidly in recent years, only a few has actually examined African-Americans representation specifically in the form

of videos. For instance, (Guo and Harlow 2014) conducted a study on stereotypes of African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians in YouTube Videos. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how African-Americans are represented in YouTube.

Since the videos are mostly about African American culture and history, thus this study chooses the representation of African American as the focus of this study. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the representation of African Americans throughout the videos. Moreover, the videos gives an insight about African American culture. To examine the videos, the writer applies the theory of Cultural Racism. Cultural racism claimed that non-Europeans are less advanced than Europeans in general cultural development. The urgency of this issue is apparent since it is an ongoing issue, which explains the need to study the representation of African American videos on the celebration of their culture. Thus, readers can be more aware when such racist values exist in any form of media.

1.2. Statement of the Problems

In order to have a clear guideline to conduct the research, the writer formulates the statement of the problem as follow:

How is African-American represented throughout the *Black History Month* videos?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

According to the statement of problems that has been made by the writer above, this study aims to seek how African-American is represented throughout the *Black History Month* videos.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The study expects to contribute to the study of cultural studies especially at the English Department of Universitas Airlangga. Moreover, the writer wishes that this study is able to inspire others to conduct a similarly themed research on representation of African American in online media. In addition to that, this study is expected to broaden the readers' knowledge about African Americans, particularly of African Americans' history, life and struggles. The findings of this study will confer benefit to the current society considering that *YouTube* and race play an important role as media and in our daily life. Moreover, it is expected that this study can raise people's awareness on the tendency of the appearance of racism codes in popular media.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

- a. African-American : African Americans are an ethnic group of Americans who were born with partial or total origins of black racial groups in Africa. (Rastogi, et al. 2011)
- b. Black History Month : Black History Month is an annual celebration of achievements by African Americans and a time

for recognizing the central role of blacks in US history (Britannica 2014).

- c. *BuzzFeedVideo* : *BuzzFeedVideo* is the main YouTube channel for *BuzzFeed*, an internet Media Company located in New York and Los Angeles.
- d. Cultural Racism : Cultural racism refers to racial discrimination, which includes the conversion of biologically based practices of racial exclusion into culture-based practices. (Goldberg 1993)
- e. Representation : Representation is a vital process in which produces meaning and exchange it among members of a culture (Hall 1997).