

**Debra Merskin “Winnebagos, Cherokees, Apaches, and Dakotas: The Persistence of Stereotyping of American Indians in American Advertising and Brands”**

**Main Point:** One way stereotypes about Native Americans are perpetuated in modern society is via advertising. Brands that rely on images of Native Americans depend on the fact that these stereotypes already exist. Though they may have been created “in less enlightened times” (322), they have since ingrained themselves in popular American culture. Many stereotypes are so pervasive that we do not question them.

**Central Themes and Concepts**

- Brands tie their products to the desired stereotype via signs and symbols. In the case of Sue Bee Honey, a female Indian is used as the main marketing image. Customers associate the stereotypical qualities of a Native American woman (purity, innocence, naturalness) with the product.

- Another Native American stereotype that persists in advertising is that of the bloodthirsty savage, discussed in this article in relation to Crazy Horse Malt Liquor. The image of Crazy Horse in military headdress signifies the ideas of wildness, adventure, and war. In this particular case, the brand is not just using an image of a Native American in order to associate its stereotypes with the product. By connecting this image with alcohol and marketing to Native Americans, Crazy Horse draws on and furthers Indians stereotypes about alcohol.

-One can also observe this kind of stereotyping of blacks in advertising. Most notable is Aunt Jemima, who represents the happy mamma of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Deep South. The persistence of these black stereotypes have waned, however, as blacks have gained more of a voice in society. Native Americans, on the other hand, only account for less than 1% of the population, thus their voice is unlikely to be heard by advertisers or legislators.

**Key Quotes**

“Stereotypes are over generalized beliefs that ‘get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped, and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity’” (323)

“The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them.” (327)

**Questions/Critiques**

I would love to see a more rigorous study of this phenomenon. Is there a way to empirically analyze the pervasiveness and the effect of such stereotypes in advertising?

The author assumes that all characterizations of Native American stereotypes are a negative. Is this categorically true/is there an instance when a positive stereotype (like the pure and innocent

Indian woman) is not that bad? Does the fact that the company willingly associates themselves with Native American culture (positive intentions) mediate any negative effects?