

Continuation of the Pocahontas Paradox:

The Stereotypes of Aboriginal Women presented in Halloween Costumes

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Abstract

The present study examined adult women's Halloween costumes to see how Aboriginal women are presented through these costumes. Three types of Aboriginal women were identified in these costumes: the sexual native, the noble native and the rebellious native. Implications of these findings are discussed herein.

Introduction

Halloween has become one of the most celebrated holidays in North America creating a large market for Halloween costumes and Halloween paraphilia. Many of these costumes portray popular culture characters; one of these being that of the North American Indian. Such costumes tend to use humour and an emphasis on negative features of the racial other to represent the culture (Mueller, 2007). Thus, when dressing up as "Indian", one is essentially mocking the culture, or presenting it negatively.

The Native American Woman

The Native American woman is one of the most typical Indian costumes distributed, with various selling names such as "Huron Honey," "Tribal Temptress", "Pocahottie," and "Indian Princess". Native American women are subjected to the "Pocahontas Paradox" in which they are either a noble Indian princess or a savage. (Portman, 2001). The North American Indian woman comes to be seen in one of two ways: (1) as strong, powerful and dangerous women, or (2) as a sexy, exotic, promiscuous woman (Portman, 2001). Since many members of the general population are not familiar with Aboriginal culture, Halloween costumes may be the most direct exposure the general populous has for coming into contact with an Aboriginal women's world/identity. Little research has been conducted by academics in this field of cultural representation (Mckenchie, 2008). The present study examines how Aboriginal women are represented through Halloween costumes, predicting that representations will provide evidence for the "Pocahontas Paradox" reinforcing the noble versus savage representations identified in earlier research.

Methods

A content analysis was used to examine 52 Adult Women's costume advertisements with a Native American theme from Spirit Halloween and Costumer Super Centre. All selected ads contained the words "Native", "Indian" or a word suggestive of Aboriginal culture such as "Pocahottie", "Wolf Warrior", or "Tribal" in the title. Each ad was examined on the basis of its costume title, costume characteristics and costume descriptions.

Results

The majority of costume titles included words that emphasized sexuality such as the word "Sexy", "Hottie", "Temptress" and "Pocahottie". The second most prevalent word was "Indian". Other titles frequently included the word "Princess", or a cultural reference such as "Pow-Wow". The vast majority of the costumes contained a headdress (96%) and fringed clothing (95%). The most common theme evident in the descriptions was that of attracting men with the costume. With claims such "Plenty of men will be beating their American Indian drums for you..." and "Have all the men chanting your name..". The second most common theme was that of doing Indian activities, such as "beading" and "sending smoke". The third most common theme was that of being the "Warrior", "Rebellious Indian" and the "wild one".

"Sexy Cherokee Warrior Indian Adult Costume"



Description: "If you're more interested in war than basket weaving, then you'll love staging an attack in this Sexy Cherokee Warrior Indian Adult Costume!"

"Women's Sexy Indian Hottie Deluxe Costume"



Description: "Everyone will want to invite you to their teepee for powwow when you're dressed as a naughty native in this Women's Sexy Indian Hottie Deluxe Costume!"

Discussion and Conclusion

Like the Pocahontas Paradox these costumes depicting Aboriginal women fall into the same categories of either sexual or noble princesses. Not only are the women sexualized through the costume but also through ad titles. Titles such as Princess and Warrior especially support the Pocahontas Paradox. Unlike the representations, Aboriginal cultures are varied not only in their cultures and ways, but also in their clothing. Although it was mainly the Plains Indians that wore fringed clothing, and headdresses were not traditionally a woman's item, the majority of costumes contained both headdresses and fringed clothing. This gives the impression that all Aboriginal cultures were the same, and not their own distinct peoples. The descriptions of the costumes also played heavily into the Pocahontas Paradox. The descriptions often either stated how the costume will help attract men, or how aboriginal ways will attract men, sexualizing the nature of Aboriginal traditions and activities. Other descriptions stated how one can become a rebellious Indian or a warrior in the costume and leave behind the boring Aboriginal ways. These descriptions undermine the ways of Aboriginal women, identify traditional ways as boring, and perpetuate the notion that Aboriginal life in an unsatisfactory one (i.e., themes of join the party, escape the reservation or find some men). These descriptions also suggest how one should act as an Aboriginal woman, how to view Aboriginal women and they ultimately reinforce the stereotypes about them.

In conclusion, these costumes, titles, and descriptions reinforce the Pocahontas Paradox in their portrayals of Aboriginal women as a sex object, a rebellious warrior or a noble princess.

References

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- Portman, T. A., & Herring, R. D. (2001). Debunking the Pocahontas Paradox: The Need for a Humanistic Perspective. *Journal Of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development*, 40(2), 185-199.

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