



This PDF is a continuation to a blog post “[Media & Black Adolescents Series: Dope’s Complicated Relationship with Racial Stereotypes.](#)” Read about the movie “Dope” and more about Black stereotypes on the original blog post leading to this continuation.

The Juxtaposition

Throughout the film, Malcolm is viewed as an outsider, whose character is developed on the notion that he is unlike his racially stereotypical counterparts at his school and in his neighborhood. Even when Malcolm sells drugs and threatens one of his peers with a gun, his actions appear positive and justified. More notably, he is viewed less as a criminal and more as a savvy and clever young man. Comparatively, Dom better fits the audience’s schema of a manipulative and selfish criminal. As a result, Dom’s acts of violence feel much more normal and expected. This makes Dom’s character problematic for more passive viewers who already have negative racial attitudes, as their beliefs may be reinforced. However, it is also worth noting that the director may have intended for these stereotypes to reflect the racial biases of society. Perhaps Dom and Malcolm’s characters serve as a juxtaposition of a shallow, negative depiction of Black male versus a more complex, positive one.

The importance of Malcolm’s character cannot be fully understood until the near end of the film, when he picks up a gun in order to protect the drug money from his high school bullies. There is a shift in tone, as both the bullies and the audience are shocked by Malcolm’s sudden turn to violence. At this point, the audience is forced to question why Malcolm’s gun usage feels different than the other violence present in the movie? Would the reaction be the same if Dom had the gun?

This scene can be better understood through Jackson (2006) and the idea of the dehumanization of the Black bodies. Jackson writes, “Black bodies were dispensable...they were property and possessions whose foreign and physical bodies were literally considered tools for labor and procreation that were evacuated of thought and culture” (Jackson, 2006).

Perhaps the scene feels more intense because the audience views Malcolm as an individual and less as a dehumanized Black male with a gun. Maybe Malcolm’s life appears less “dispensable” than someone like Dom because he has defied the conventional portrayal of the Black criminal.

This concept, however, begs the question of what exactly helps Malcolm avoid the criminal label? Is it his “Whiter” persona? His intelligence? His hopes and dreams?

Final Thoughts

Overall, the film *Dope* challenges its viewers to examine how their schemas categorize Black and White. More specifically, how those schemas impact perceptions of others. While the film falls victim to certain clichés, it appears to be an intentional attempt to critique the racial biases of many Americans. However, the juxtaposition of Malcolm’s character with Dom’s could have adverse effects by reinforcing negative stereotypes associated with Black men. At surface value, the film runs the risk of perpetuating Malcolm as a “good character” solely because he acts more “White”, while portraying Dom as more negative because it acts “Black”. While more active viewers might see a deeper commentary within this comparison, this might be the only takeaway for more passive viewers. Nevertheless, the underlying message of the film seems to be an attempt to present a more complex and individualistic young Black man through Malcolm’s character.

For parents or educators who may choose to use this movie as a teaching/learning tool, here are some possible **discussion questions**:

- How do you think Malcolm’s unique character impacts Black audience members? Is he harmful or helpful?
- Is Malcolm’s less stereotypical character enough to counteract the more stereotypical characters in the film?

References

Allen, R. L., & Thornton, M. C. (1992). Social structural factors, Black media and stereotypical self-characterization among African Americans. *National Journal of Sociology*

Jackson, R. L. (2006). *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. State University of New York Press.