

Thematic Analysis of the Stereotypical Representations of African American Students in *The Substitute 2: School's Out* 1998 Film

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Received: 17/09/2025

Accepted: 03/12/2025

published: 26/12/2025

Abstract

This study examines how *The Substitute 2: School's Out* 1998 film reinforces racial stereotypes about Black students in urban schools. The Braun and Clarke model of thematic analysis is employed to systematically investigate the stereotyping of African American students in the film. The findings reveal that the film perpetuates negative stereotypes, such as violence, criminality and academic disengagement, without offering any favourable representations. These stereotypical depictions shed light on the broader media narrative that has historically stigmatized the African American community which contributed to the broader societal prejudices. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions about race and a call for accurate and truthful portrayals of minority groups in American cinema.

Keywords: stereotypes, Hollywood, thematic analysis, Black Americans, racism

1. Introduction

Media researchers have shown a considerable interest in the impact of media stereotypes on both the individual and the various social groups. In this context, Allport (1994) explains that stereotypes are frequently reinforced and shaped by various types of mass media. However, this field of research encountered skepticism. Consequently, many studies have been conducted to provide adequate evidence of media stereotyping people based on their race or gender. Recently, scholars devoted their time to studying how these stereotyped images influence the perception and the attitude of these groups (Dixon, 2020).

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Societal perceptions of the different social groups are undoubtedly influenced by media representations. The latter serve as a primary source of information for viewers with limited experiences of those groups. Racial stereotypes have historically been created by American films, in particular. In fact, Media stereotypes can be either positive or negative. Still, both types of stereotypes may cause problems and misunderstandings because they influence the beliefs and behaviours of in-group and out-group members (Billings & Parrott, 2020). For Lippmann, these stereotypical depictions become "pictures in our head" that guide the audience's perception and interpretation of social relations and groups leading to prejudice and discrimination (Lippmann, 1922; Allport, 1954).

Scholars have identified several types of stereotypes, each with different implications. Among the most prevalent stereotypes are gender stereotypes, age stereotypes, occupational stereotypes, and racial stereotypes. The latter are among the most pervasive stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in American media. For example, African American representations on media have attracted the attention of media scholars because of the binary equation of Black vs. white in the U.S.

African American characters may be assigned positive roles still, but many of them tend to be represented less moral than the white characters. On the contrary for athletic roles, African Americans tend to be the best choice for filmmakers, unlike the whites, who are portrayed as less athletic and more intelligent and strategic. In the field of music, Dixon (2020) asserts that Black Americans are generally depicted as performers or background dancers. Materialism and sexual manifestation are the common themes in the hip-hop music videos.

In the context of racial stereotyping, American films frequently portray Black American students negatively. Unfavourable stereotypes such as aggressiveness and criminality are generally associated with this category. These biased representations have detrimental effects on how public opinion views Black youth, which provoke social inequalities and unjustified injustice. Using *The Substitute 2: School's Out* film as a case study, this research explores how these stereotypes are thematically constructed and ingrained in American films, highlighting deeper ramifications for race, identity, and education in American society. Hence, this article employs the Braun and Clarke model of thematic analysis to address the following research questions:

1. What are the most common stereotypes that Hollywood perpetuates about black American students?

2. Do Black Americans play restricted roles based on their race? And which types of roles are assigned to them?

2. Definition of Stereotypes

In his book *Public Opinion* 1922, Lippmann was the first to coin the term "stereotype" to refer to the fixed image that the human mind forms about a specific social group. Blum (2004) defines the word as misleading generalizations about various social groups. These

misrepresentations lack and resist any evidence, and, consequently, the 'stereotyper' fails to see the existing characteristics that stand in opposition to the specific characteristics that are associated with the stereotyped group.

Stereotypes are viewed from a cognitive perspective as “mental shortcuts” that enable people to process information easily and rapidly. The world around people incorporates a considerable number of stimuli that necessitate attention that the human mind is unable to process all at once. As a result, certain mental strategies are applied in making decisions quickly. Research has shown that stereotypes are considered as “mental heuristic” that help the perceiver to simplify the social environment and make quick judgments based on someone’s membership in a certain social group (Khan, Benda & Stagnaro, 2012).

In this regard, Lippmann (1922) argues that this method is efficient because the attempt to observe everything in detail, instead of perceiving it as types and generalities, is tiring, and in a world full of stimuli, nearly impossible. Stereotypes are, therefore, shortcuts that compensate for the limitation of the cognitive capacity to process information quickly and reduce the effort needed by the perceiver (McCarthy, Yzerbyt & Spears, 2004). In this context, Hall (1997) states that stereotypes are overgeneralizations and “reductionist beliefs” about members of the same social groups. People tend to focus on a few different and easily recognizable qualities of a person and unthinkably narrow everything about that person down to those images and traits and fix them without any possible future changes.

Most of the definitions that researchers attribute to the concept of stereotypes encapsulate the general idea of “stereotypes as knowledge structures that serve as mental ‘pictures’ of the groups in question” (Nelson, 2009, p. 2).

3. Thematic Analysis

3.1. Definition of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a prevalent method in research that seeks to provide a systematic description and interpretation of patterns in qualitative data. It entails the researcher's engagement with the data, resulting in themes generated from the data and not discovered in it (Waraas, 2022). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis refers to "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.6). In addition, it provides interpretation for elements of the research topic.

Braun and Clarke also emphasize the importance of thematic analysis in qualitative research because it equips the researcher with the fundamental skills to conduct other forms of qualitative research. Because of its flexibility, thematic analysis is considered as a useful tool to reach "a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (pp. 4-6).

They also claim that one major advantage of thematic analysis is its flexibility and accessibility to novice researchers in the field of qualitative research. Another reason for researchers to conduct thematic analysis is its ability to highlight the similarities and differences that exist across data patterns. Furthermore, it yields unexpected and unanticipated findings and offers both social and psychological interpretations of data.

3.2. Semantic and Latent Themes

An important decision when conducting thematic analysis is to identify the level of the themes, at a semantic level or a latent level. The semantic or explicit level is when the researcher focuses on the surface or explicit meaning of the data without any additional details. The analytic process progresses from data description and summary to the interpretation and theorising of data patterns in relation to previous literature. Unlike the semantic approach, a thematic analysis at a latent level involves a scrutiny of the underlying ideologies, beliefs and ideas that shape the semantic or the surface content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3. Phases of Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke model consists of six major phases, providing a comprehensive framework for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Transcribing, reading, and re-reading the data while noting down the first ideas is the initial phase in getting acquainted with the data. The next stage is generating initial codes by identifying the intriguing elements of the data. Following coding, the researcher organizes these codes into potential themes. After that, a thematic map is created in order to compare those themes to the coded extracts and to the complete dataset to ensure that they appropriately represent the data. The analysis, then, proceeds by defining and naming the themes and refining the specifics of each theme. The last phase is producing the report which includes the selection of vivid and compelling samples and analysing them thoroughly (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Thematic Analysis of *The Substitute 2: School's Out* (1998)

Thematic analysis is conducted to examine semantic and latent themes in the film, allowing for a detailed interpretation of its narrative and visual elements. This method enables the identification of both surface-level and underlying patterns that shape the film's overall messages and ideological impact.

4.1. Film Synopsis

The Substitute 2: School's out was released in 1998 as a sequel to the 1996 film *The Substitute*. It was directed by Steven Pearl starring Treat Williams as Karl Thomasson, who is a mercenary working undercover as a substitute teacher in order to investigate the murder of his brother in an inner-city school.

4.2. Semantic Themes of *The Substitute 2: School's Out*

4.2.1. Violence in Inner-city Schools

The Lenthrop High School students are transformed into violent enforcers. Because of their social milieu, they were raised to believe that in order to be strong, and honourable, violence is not only acceptable but also unavoidable. The film highlights the idea that

aggression is the students' way to survive and to gain status among their peers. Several scenes depict how students are involved in violent acts and gang activities. One essential scene portrays a fight in the classroom between the substitute teacher and a student. It mirrors the aggressiveness exhibited by the students in the urban schools. In fact, inner-city schools are often depicted as dangerous and unsafe places, with urban education being framed as a source of problem (Arnston 2020).

4.2.2. Vengeance:

Contemporary American narratives portray retribution as limitless and insatiable aiming to develop a vengeful desire within the national imagination (Wiggins, 2018). The film explores the concept of justice via vengeance, raising the question of whether pursuing justice through retaliation is justified. Karl Thomasson works undercover within an inner-city school to find out the gang members responsible for his brother's murder. The substitute teacher commits many murders and eventually his revenge is carried out and the film implies a happy ending.

In fact, Karl embodies the typical Hollywood hero, the lone vigilante who fights corruption through force. Hence, the use of extreme violence and illegal methods to dismantle corrupt figures and to protect the innocent is justified in the film. In addition, taking revenge into one's own hands is the only solution when the law fails to serve justice and disseminate safety and tranquility. In this context, Wiggins (2018) asserts how the new American revenge stories center on a trained killer who is drawn back into violence after the murder of a loved one, as seen in *Unforgiven* (1992), *Man on Fire* (2004), and *John Wick* (2014). In these movies, the protagonist seeks vengeance with brutal, calculated efficiency, and the narrative itself connects lethal proficiency with moral righteousness. The risk of these films, Wiggins notes, is that they normalise and justify violence as a critical response to the reality.

4.2.3. Powerless Educational System and Gang Influence

The film sheds light on the influence that gangs have on the urban schools. The Lenthrop School is controlled by gangs instead of educators, and criminal elements are deeply ingrained into the school students and staff. Numerous illegal acts committed by the gang members occur within the school which reflects how gangs operate fearlessly. Many students are depicted as having no alternative but to get involved into the gang life reflecting how criminal forces are able to corrupt what is supposed to be a safe educational environment. The educational system's inability to control violence stems from either actual fear or a potential involvement in the illegal activity.

4.2.4. Institutional Corruption

The film sheds light on the manipulation of school students to commit crimes. One of the school teachers is responsible for many criminal acts occurring inside and outside school, including the murder of Mr. Thomasson's brother. He even exploits students into engaging in criminal activities like carjackings and drug trafficking for personal benefits. The exploitation of students' social and economic situations is a major theme in the film. The antagonist targets

students who are in need for a sense of belonging and an opportunity to escape their desperate lives. The film critiques the misuse of power and authority and how people can give up on their principles for the sake of their gains. The misuse of power and authority is also mirrored in the unjustified silence of the other school staff to the corruption taking place inside school. This moral collapse illustrates how principles are easily abandoned when power and authority are left unchecked.

4.3. Latent Themes of *The Substitute 2: School's Out*

4.3.1. Hip-hop Music

The opening scene of Karl Thomasson in class for the first time sets the tone for how the Black community culture is represented within educational institutions. A Black student is shown listening to music on a portable recorder while others participate in dancing and rapping. This moment of cultural expression is perceived by Karl, the white authority, as a threat, and he violently ejects the recorder out of the window. Karl's reaction is a subtle rejection of Black culture existence within institutional spaces. The student's outrage over the destruction of his recorder denotes the profound integration of music, particularly hip-hop, into Black youth lives and culture, which is frequently rejected and even penalized by white authority figures in educational settings. Such rejection stems from the whites' perception of this type of music as a form of chaos and danger.

Seidel (2011) states that hip-hop culture is viewed as a source of power that competes for students' attention, a reality that frustrates educators who dedicate time and efforts in an attempt to engage students. In this context, hip-hop, as Jackson and Anderson (2009) argue, has become a global platform for expressing feelings and thoughts about crime, poverty, violence, and various social issues through its lyrics. Furthermore, Dahlin (2019) asserts that the manifestation of such social concerns in hip-hop music reflects the symptoms of social inequality and oppression.

4.3.2. Black Violence and Criminality

Hollywood has notably succeeded in perpetuating the image of the violent and aggressive Black American who is fearlessly ready to commit crimes. In *The Substitute 2: School's Out*, criminality and aggression are not just present but a central theme in the story. The film exemplifies clearly the misrepresentation of Blacks in the cinema. The opening scene shows masked individuals shooting a white teacher and stealing a car. Subsequently, the narrative reveals that they are Black students.

Another scene is when a Black student attacks the substitute teacher in class without showing any respect for the school administration and the teacher himself. One of the school teachers sarcastically poses a question to Mr Thomasson "Well, how are you holding up first day in hell". His comment depicts the class setting as a battlefield. In fact, the school is portrayed more like a prison. Kara Lavelle, one of the school teachers, clarifies that "Randall worked on the special students wing. Kids with disciplinary problems. Violent". The stereotype that Black youth are violent and disrespectful echoes in every single scene. One of

the teachers mentions how Mr. Randall "had some idea that these cretins are worth some kind of an effort" suggesting the hopelessness of a positive change.

Many other scenes portray Black students as extremely violent killers, stealers, drug dealers and dangerous students. The cycle of violence in the Blacks' live is inherent and endless. This is powerfully depicted in a heated conversation between Mr Thomason and a student, who is hopeless about having a brighter future: "Oh yeah, right, right. I can be a stockbroker, right?" He further admits the bitter reality saying "my pops is in prison right. My little brother just got shot in a drive by. He insists that "there's only one way to live this life! and I'm living it right now!" which ultimately suggests that there is no room for escape. At the end, the film is a mere reproduction of the stereotype that Blacks' violence and criminality are inherent and inevitable traits and do not reflect a systematic failure to create a fairer society.

In his research, Ștefanovici (2014) notes that in many American films, blacks are represented as morally inferior and physically violent, often using vulgar language and acting against the law. Similarly, Major (2020) concluded that even in black produced films, such as *House Party* (1990), *Boys in the Hood* (1991), and *The George McKenna Story* (1986), black students are depicted as violent, impoverished, criminal, and uneducated.

4.3.3. Academic Disengagement

The portrayal of Black students in the film mirrors a recurring stereotype in Hollywood in which Black youth are intellectually inferior and alienated from the school environment. This apathetic attitude toward their academic life is deeply constructed in the film and the image of a careless and disrespectful student is subtly presented. This racial representation suggests that Black youth lack both the intelligence and mental capacity for academic achievement. The stereotype of the illiterate black student is ingrained in the minds of the audience, reinforcing the idea that blacks are incapable of achieving high academic standards. They are further positioned as rebellious and intellectually inadequate with lower educational levels compared to their white counterparts (Toliver 2017, Punyanunt-Carter 2008, Ștefanovici 2014).

The future for the Blacks in the film is one dimensional: that of becoming a gangster and joining the street life. The belief in the inevitability of this future blurs any option of having other alternatives and ambitions. In addition, the plot deliberately contrasts these distorted images with the arrival of Karl Thomasson, the white ex-mercenary who had no teaching training. Still, he is portrayed as having the capacity to change their attitude and influence their decisions. This narrative construction reinforces the idea of white supremacy and Black inferiority, where white figures are proved to be more effective educators for Black students even when having no formal qualifications. The film sustains a racial hierarchical representation of Black students who lack the intellectual depth and capacity to succeed and overcome the social barriers.

4.3.4. The Deficiency of Positive Portrayal of African Americans

The script of *The Substitute: School's Out* film engages in the narrative marginalisation of Black characters. None of the students or school staff is depicted positively. The black janitor who actively stands against the criminal actions in the school is framed to look clumsy, naïve and unstable. Instead of emphasizing his clear morality and courage, the script deliberately represents him as a source of comic relief.

The marginalization of this character is further reinforced via the relationship between the janitor and Karl. The latter repeatedly mocks him and undermines his efforts and role in revealing the truth, which restricts the audience's ability to view him as a catalyst for the change within the narrative. By usurping the janitor's credibility and diminishing his indispensable role, the film reinforces the racially biased disparity in screen representation of Blacks, which eliminates any potential for a multidimensional depiction of this social group. In this context, Entman and Rojecki (2000) confirm how Black characters are frequently assigned roles that are visible, noticeable but not memorable enough to influence the audience's perceptions. They further argue how Hollywood films remain faithful to white protagonists even when a Black character is central to the story denying the Black agency by subjugating it to white heroism.

4.3.5. The Construction of White Student as Foil to their Black Counterparts

One major latent theme in the film is the binary representation of black and white students, which functions as a racialized device. This comparison is embodied in the character of Karl's niece, Anya, who is portrayed as an epitome of the excellent student. She is praised by one of her teachers for her academic performance, "You know, Anya's one of the top students in Lenthrop. You must be very proud of her". These few lines serve as a stark contrast to the Black students who are intentionally assigned the opposite traits, such as academic failure, limited cognitive capacities, and behavioural problems (Ștefanovici, 2014).

In fact, the role of Anya stands as a narrative foil to the bias embedded in the film. Her whiteness is deliberately associated with intelligence and academic excellence. Conversely, Black students are deprived of these qualities, and their portrayal is diminished to stereotypes linked to laziness and academic disinterest. The film narrative frames blackness as the antithesis of the whiteness's excellence and educational achievement

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this article sheds light on the racist discrimination in the representation of black American students in Hollywood. *The Substitute School's Out* 1998 narrative has persistently associated negative and undesirable traits with Blacks because of their race and skin colour. Black students, in particular, have been prone to derogative portrayals in American films. In sharp contrast to their white counterparts, Black students are frequently linked to violence, laziness and academic failure. These misconceptions about academic performance and behaviour are depicted as inherent and unavoidable rather than a consequence of systematic failure. Ultimately, the film is a mere reproduction of the same

cinematic stereotypes within which blackness is viewed through the lenses of violence, criminality and academic failure.

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